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MY UNIVERSITIES

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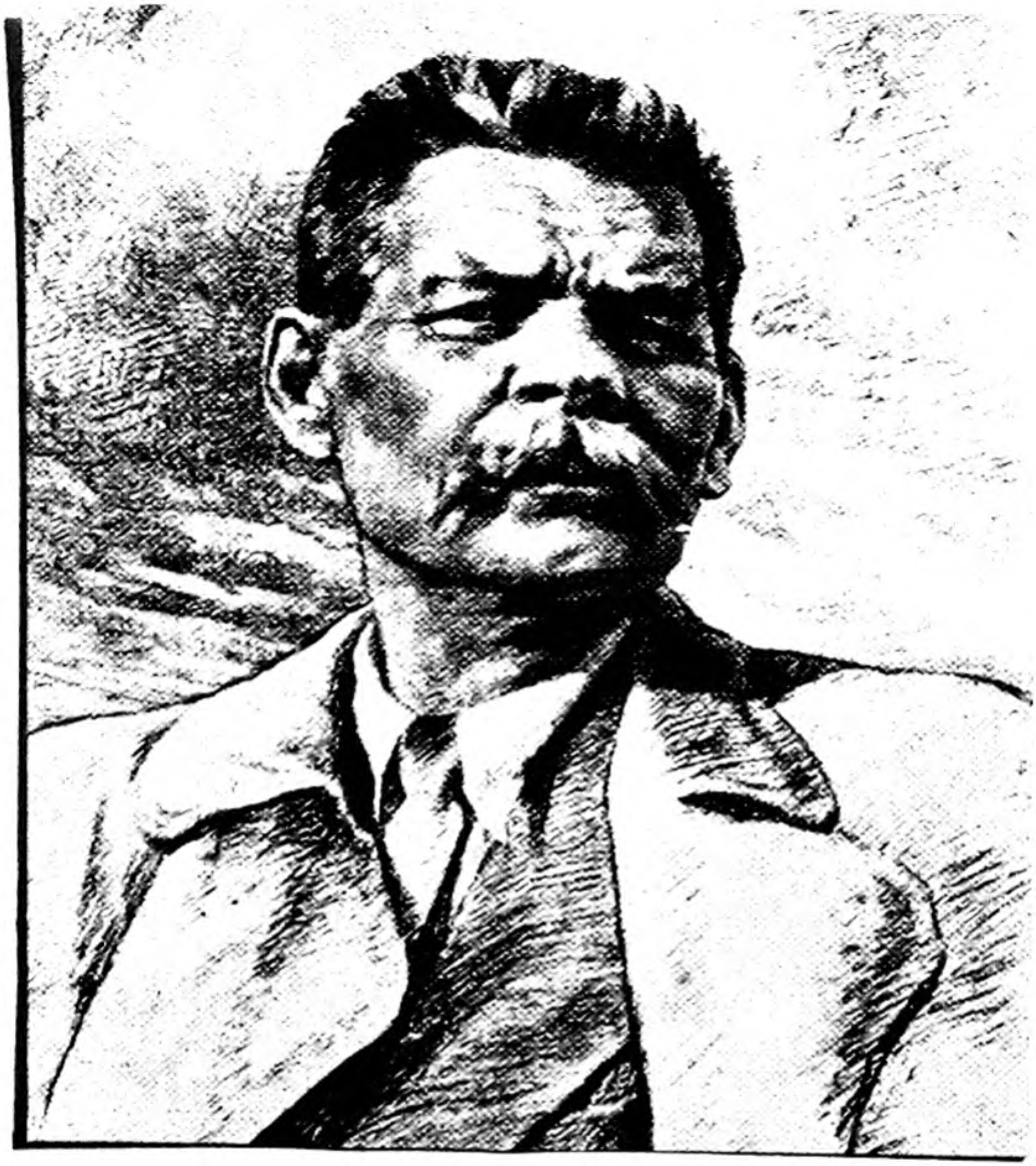

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М. ГОРЬКИЙ

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ИЗДАТЕЛЬСТВО ЛИТЕРАТУРЫ
НА ИНОСТРАННЫХ ЯЗЫКАХ
Москва

AI. 87
28

M. GORKY

MY UNIVERSITIES

Third Edition

FOREIGN LANGUAGES
PUBLISHING HOUSE
Moscow

TRANSLATED FROM THE RUSSIAN
BY HELEN ALTSCHULER

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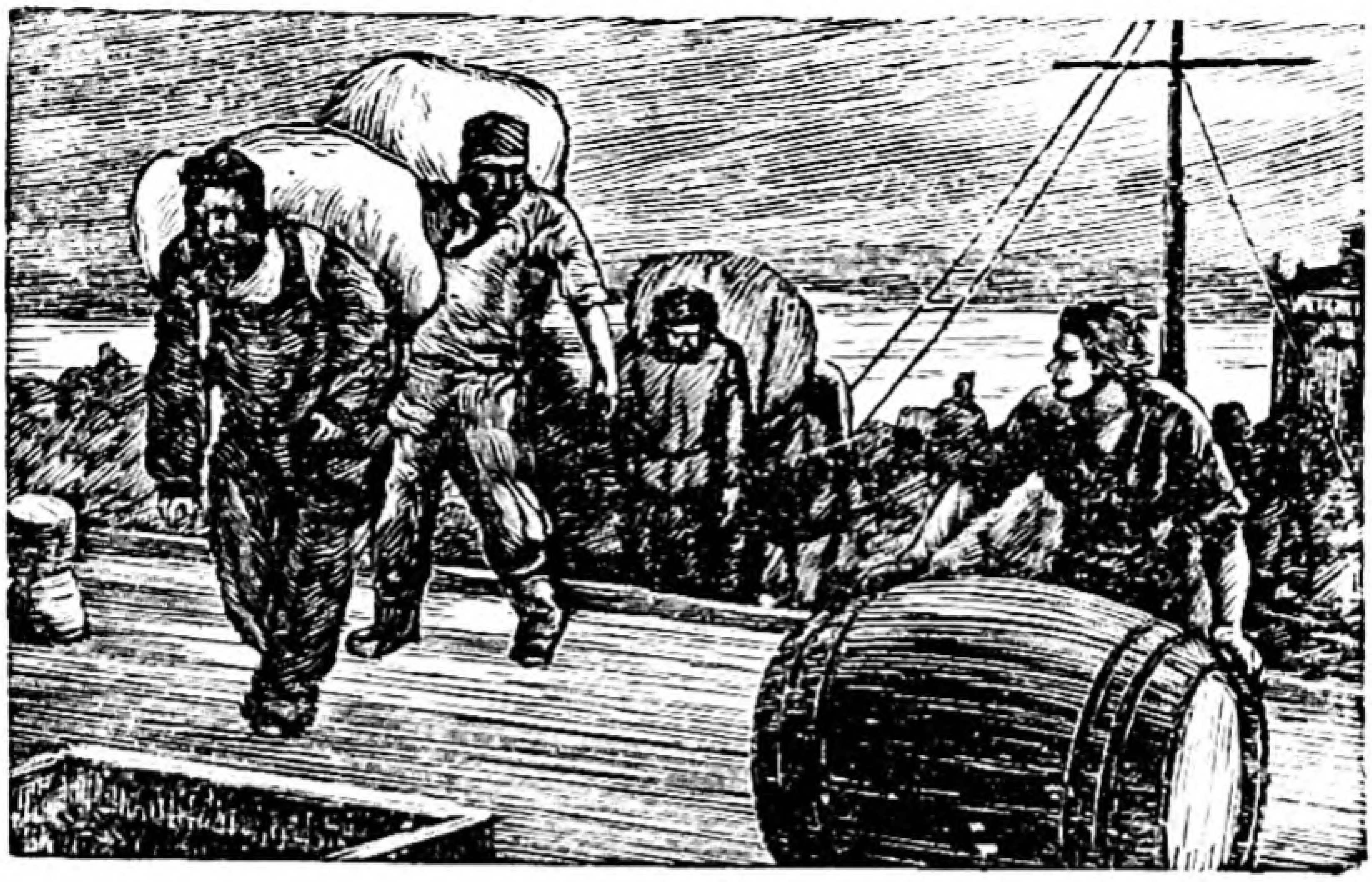

AND SO, I was leaving for Kazan, to study at the University—no less!

The thought of University studies had been put into my head by a Gymnasium student, N. Yevreinov—a lovable youth, very handsome, with the tender eyes of a woman. He lived in an attic room in the same house with me. Seeing me often with a book under my arm, he grew so interested as to seek my acquaintance; and it was not long before he began to urge it upon me that I possessed an "extraordinary gift for learning."

"Nature created you to further science," he declared, tossing his long hair back in graceful emphasis.

I did not yet know, then, that one might further science in the capacity of guinea pig; and Yevreinov made it so very clear that it was just such lads as I the universities were lacking. The memory of Lomonosov, of course, was evoked as a shining example. In Kazan, Yevreinov said, I would stay with him, studying through the autumn and winter to master the Gymnasium programme. Then I would take "some few" examinations—that was just how he put it: "some few"; the University would grant me a scholarship; and in five years or so I would be a "learned man." It was all very simple; for Yevreinov was nineteen, and his heart was kind.

He passed his examinations and left. Some two weeks later, I followed.

In parting, Granny told me:

"Don't you be cross with people. You're always so cross. Stern, you're getting to be, and too demanding. That comes down to you from Grandfather. And—well, what's your grandfather? Lived all these years, and ended up nowhere, the poor old man. You keep one thing in mind: it's not God that judges men. That's the devil's pastime. Well, good-bye. . . ."

And, brushing the scant tears from her dark, flabby cheeks, she said:

"We won't meet again. You'll be moving farther and farther off, restless soul, and I'll be dying."

I had drifted away from my dear grandmother of late, seeing her only rarely; but now it came to me with sudden pain that I would never again meet a friend so close, so much a part of me.

From the stern of the boat I looked back to where she stood, at the edge of the pier—crossing herself and, with the corner of her worn old shawl, drying her face and her dark eyes, bright with inextinguishable love of man.

And there I was, in the semi-Tatar city. Cramped rooms in a small, one-storey house standing, all alone, on a low hill at the end of a narrow, poverty-stricken street. On one side the house faced a vacant lot, thickly overgrown with weeds—the scene of a one-time conflagration. Deep among the wormwood, the agrimony and horse sorrel, surrounded by elder thickets, loomed the ruins of a brick building; and beneath the ruins there was a big cellar, in which stray dogs lived and died. I remember it very well, that cellar: one of my universities.

The Yevreinovs—mother and two sons—lived on a miserly pension. From my first days in their home, I perceived the tragic melancholy with which the drab little widow, returning from the market, would lay out her purchases on the kitchen table and ponder her difficult problem: how to turn a few small bits of inferior meat into good and sufficient food for three healthy boys—not to speak of herself.

She spoke very little. Her grey eyes were set in the meek and hopeless obstinacy of a work horse that has spent its strength to the last. Dragging its cart uphill, the poor horse knows that it can never make the top; yet still it pulls its load.

One morning, three or four days after my arrival, I was helping her with some vegetables in the kitchen. The boys were still asleep. Quietly, warily, she asked me:

"What have you come to town for?"

"To study. At the University."

Her eyebrows slowly lifted, crinkling her sallow forehead. Her knife slipped, and gashed her finger. Sucking the wound, she sank on to a chair, but at once sprang up again, with a sharp:

"Ah, the devil!"

When she had tied up her finger with a handkerchief, she said approvingly:

"You peel potatoes well."

I should think I peeled them well! I told her about my work on the river boat. She asked:

"Do you think that's sufficient preparation for entering the University?"

In those days I had but little conception of humour. I took her question seriously, and explained to her the sequence of measures as a result of which the doors to the temple of learning were to open before me.

She sighed:

"Ah, Nikolai, Nikolai!"

Just at this point, Nikolai came into the kitchen to wash—sleepy, tousleheaded, and, as always, in excellent spirits.

"Some meat patties would be nice, Mother," he said.

"Yes, they would," the mother agreed.

Anxious to display my erudition in the culinary arts, I remarked that the meat was not good enough for patties, and, besides, that there was not enough of it.

At this Varvara Ivanovna became very angry, and directed at me a few such forceful words that my very ears flushed and seemed to grow. Flinging down the bunch of carrots she had been washing, she left the kitchen. Nikolai winked at me, and explained:

"She's in a mood."

Settling down comfortably on a bench, he informed me that women, generally, were more nervous than men, such being the female make-up, as had been incontestably established by a certain eminent scientist—in Switzerland, if I remember correctly. An Englishman, one John Stuart Mill, had also had something to say on this subject.

Nikolai greatly enjoyed the process of teaching me, and seized on every opportunity that offered for stuffing into my brain one or another essential item, ignorance of which must surely make life impossible. I would drink in his words eagerly; and after a while Foucault, de la Rochefoucauld, and de la Rochejaquelein would merge, in my mind, into one entity, and I would be quite unable to recall whether it was Lavoisier who had beheaded Dumouriez, or the other way around. The kindly youth was sincerely determined to "make someone" of me. He promised it confidently. But—he lacked the time and the proper conditions for systematic guidance of my education. Blinded by the egoism and thoughtlessness of youth, he did not see how his mother had to strain and shift to make ends meet. Still less was this noticed by his brother, a slow, untalkative schoolboy. But I had long been adept in the intricate conjury of kitchen chemistry and economics. I clearly perceived the desperate strivings of this woman, daily compelled to fool her children's stomachs and to feed a young stranger of unprepossessing appearance and uncouth manners. Naturally enough, every crumb of bread I swallowed here weighed heavily on my conscience. I began to search for work. Leaving the house in the early morning, I would stay away until I was sure dinner was over; and in bad weather I would spend these hours in the shelter of the cellar in the vacant lot. Sitting there among the dead dogs and cats, breathing the odours of putrefaction, listening to the pouring rain and the moaning wind, I soon began to understand that the University was an empty dream; that I would have done more wisely to run away to Persia. This, after picturing myself as a grey-bearded wizard, creator of means for growing wheat and rye with kernels the size of apples, and potatoes that would weigh a pood apiece—not to speak of numerous other benefactions for this earth, on which life was so confoundedly difficult, difficult not only for me.

I had already learned to dream of strange adventures and prodigious deeds. This was a great help to me in life's hard days; and, hard days being many, I grew more and more proficient at such dreaming. I looked for no outside assistance, and set no hopes on luck or chance. But I was gradually developing an unyielding obstinacy of will; and the more difficult life became, the stronger, even the wiser, I felt myself to be. I realized in very early life that a man is made by the resistance he presents to his surroundings.

To keep from starving, I would go to the Volga wharves, where one could easily earn fifteen or twenty kopeks. Here, among the stevedores, tramps, and thieves, I felt like a rod of iron thrust into hot coals; for every day was saturated with intense and searing impressions. Here I looked upon a whirling world in which men's instincts were coarse, their greed naked and undisguised. I was attracted by these people's bitterness against life, attracted by their attitude of mocking hostility towards everything on earth, and of carelessness towards themselves. All that I myself had experienced drew me to these people, urged the desire to plunge wholly into their caustic world. Bret Harte's tales, and the innumerable cheap novels I had read, still further intensified this world's attraction for me.

There was Bashkin, professional thief and former normal school student—a consumptive man, often and brutally beaten. Eloquently, he admonished me:

"What makes you so bashful, like a shrinking girl? Afraid to lose your honour? A girl

—her honour's all she's got to lose. For you, it's just a yoke. An ox is honest; but an ox can fill its belly on hay."

Bashkin was small and redheaded, and went about clean-shaven—like an actor. His soft, smooth movements brought to mind a kitten. Towards me, he adopted an instructive, protective attitude; and I could see that with all his heart he wished me luck and happiness. Highly intelligent, he had read many good books, of which *The Count of Monte Cristo* pleased him best of all.

"That book has heart in it, and purpose, too," he said.

He was a lover of women, and spoke of them ecstatically, smacking his lips with relish, a sort of spasm passing over his racked body. It had something unwholesome about it, this spasm, something physically repulsive. But I listened eagerly to his talk, sensing its beauty.

"Women, women," he would intone, his sallow cheeks flushing, his dark eyes glowing with enthusiasm. "For a woman, I'd do anything. Like the devil, woman knows no sin. Live in love—there's nothing better ever been invented!"

He had a fine gift for narration. Without effort, too, he would compose touching little ditties for the prostitutes, on the sorrows of crossed or unrequited love. These were sung in all the Volga towns. Among others, he was the author of that very widespread song:

When a girl is plain and poor,
And dressed all out of fashion,
Who on earth will marry her?
Not a living creature!

I had a well-wisher in Trusov—shady character. This was a fine-looking man, foppishly dressed, with a musician's delicate fingers. He kept a little shop in the Admiralty district. The sign said, "Clock Repairing"; but Trusov's business was the sale of stolen goods.

"Don't you let yourself drift into thieves' tricks, Maximich," he would say to me, stroking his greying beard impressively and screwing up his bold and crafty eyes. "That's not your road, I can see. You're the soulful kind."

"What do you mean, the soulful kind?"

"Why, the ones that are never envious—only curious to know."

That was not a true description of me. I was often envious, of many things. Thus, I envied Bashkin his gift of talking—his peculiar, verse-like style, his unexpected figures and turns of speech. I recall the beginning of one of his tales of amorous adventure:

"One cloudy-eyed night I was huddled, like an owl in a hollow tree, in a boarding house in the beggarly town of Sviyazhsk. It was autumn, October. A lazy little rain was coming down, and the wind soughed just the way a Tatar sings when someone's been mean to him—an endless o-o-o-oo-oo-oo. . . .

". . .And then she came, so light and rosy, like a cloud at sunrise, and in her eyes a lying purity of soul. 'Dear love,' she says, and her voice rang true, 'I haven't sinned against you.' I knew she was lying, and yet—I believed her. My mind knew for certain, but my heart just couldn't believe she was false."

He would talk with half-closed eyes, his body swaying rhythmically, his hand rising softly, in a frequently repeated gesture, to touch his chest, over his heart.

His voice was dull and colourless, yet his words were vivid, with something of the nightingale throbbing through them.

I envied Trusov, too. This man told fascinating tales about Siberia, Khiva, Bukhara. He spoke amusingly, yet with tremendous bitterness, of the lives of the clerical hierarchy. And one day he declared mysteriously of Tsar Alexander III:

"This tsar—he's a past master in his business."

Trusov, I thought, must be one of those "villains" who at the end of a novel, to the reader's astonishment, turn into high-souled heroes.

Sometimes, of a stuffy night, these people would cross to the meadow bank of the little Kazanka River. There, among the bushes, they would drink, and eat, and talk of their affairs —or, more often, of the intricacies of life, of the strange confusion of human relationships. Above all, they talked of women: talked of them with malice or with melancholy—movingly, at times, and almost always as though peering into a dark place where things sinister and unknown might lurk. I spent two or

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three nights with them out there, under a dark sky studded with lacklustre stars. We lay in the stuffy warmth of a little hollow, thickly overgrown with willow bushes. Through the darkness, damp because the Volga was so near, boat lights crawled, golden spiders, in every direction; and along the black mass of the bluff bank shone scattered lumps and veins of fire—the windows of homes and taverns in the wealthy village of Uslon. The paddles of steamboat wheels beat dully against the water. Sailors shouted, on a passing train of barges; and their hoarse cries were like the howling of wolves. Somewhere a hammer tapped iron. A plaintive song floated over the water—somebody's soul, gently smouldering. The song cast ashy melancholy on the heart.

And it was more melancholy still to hear the softly flowing talk of my companions. Musing on life, each spoke of what lay closest to his heart, barely listening to the others. Sitting or lying in the shadow of the willow bushes, smoking, and drinking now and then, without greed, of vodka or beer, they would go drifting back along the vague paths of memory.

"Well, there was this that happened to me," someone might say, out of the night that pressed him to the earth.

And when he had told his tale, the others would murmur their assent:

"Yes, such things happen too. All sorts of things may happen."

"Happened," "happens," "used to happen," sounded in my ears, until it seemed to me that in this night these people had entered their last hours of life. Everything had already happened; nothing would ever happen more!

This feeling tended to alienate my thoughts from Bashkin and Trusov. Still, they attracted me; and, by the logic of all I had experienced, it would have been only natural for me to take their road. My outraged hope of rising to higher things, of attaining an education—this, too, impelled me to follow them. In hours of hunger, bitterness, despair, I felt myself fully capable of crime—and not only against the "sacred institute of property." The romantic spirit of youth, however, kept me from leaving the path I was fated to tread. Besides Bret Harte, with his love of humanity, and various cheap novels, I had already read quite a number of really serious books. These aroused aspirations to other things: things only vaguely envisioned, but of greater weight than all I saw around me.

At the same time, I was forming a new type of acquaintanceships, receiving new impressions. Gymnasium students often gathered in the empty lot by the Yevreinovs' home, to play at gorodki; and I was strongly drawn to one of them, Guri Pletnyov. This was a swarthy youth, with blue-black hair like a Japanese and a face covered with tiny black spots, as though gunpowder had been rubbed into the skin. Irrepressibly jolly, skilful at games and witty in conversation, he had the makings of many and varied talents. And, like most talented Russians, he lived on what Nature had given him, making no effort to consolidate or develop his gifts. Loving music, and endowed with a delicate ear and a sensitive understanding, he played remarkably well on the gusli, the balalaika, the accordion—yet made no attempt to master finer and more difficult instruments. He was poor, and badly dressed; but his torn, rumpled shirt, patched trousers and down-at-heel boots fitted very well with his reckless spirit, his expansive gestures, his swift movements and sinewy frame.

He was like one just recovered from a long and painful illness; or like a prisoner, only yesterday released. Everything life offered was new to him, and pleasant. Everything aroused him to noisy merriment. He skipped about the world like a humming top.

Learning how difficult and precarious a life I led, he proposed that I come to stay with him, and study to be a village teacher. And so I found myself in that strange, gay slum dwelling, the "Marusovka," familiar, probably, to many a generation of Kazan students: a big, tumble-down building on Ribnoryadskaya, captured—to every appearance—from its owners by a host of half-starved students, prostitutes, and, besides these, varied human wreckage—beings that seemed to have outlived themselves. Pletnyov lived in the hall space under the attic stairs. He had a cot under the stairs, and, by the window at the end of the hall, a table and a chair. Nothing more. There were three rooms opening on this hall, two occupied by prostitutes and the third by a consumptive mathematician, formerly a seminary student—a tall, gaunt, almost fearful-looking man, overgrown with rough, reddish wool and dressed in filthy rags that barely covered his nakedness. Through the holes in these rags, one could glimpse his horrible, bluish skin and skeleton ribs.

He seemed to feed on nothing but his own nails, which were always gnawed to the quick. Day and night, he worked over some sort of drafts and calculations, coughing incessantly—a dull, booming cough. The prostitutes were afraid of him, thinking him insane; but, out of pity, they would leave bread, tea, and sugar outside his door. He would come out and pick up these packets, wheezing like a tired horse with the effort. If they forgot, or for some reason were unable, to bring their offerings, he would stand in his doorway, shouting huskily into the hall:

"Food!"

His eyes, sunk in dark pits, glittered with the pride of a madman, rejoicing in the knowledge of his own majesty. At long intervals, he would be visited by a tiny, hunchbacked monster with a twisted leg—a greyhaired creature, with powerful spectacles perched on a swollen nose, and with the sallow face of a castrate, set in a crafty smile. They would shut the door tight and sit for hours in silence. A strange hush would seem to emanate from the room. Once, however, late at night, I was wakened by the mathematician's hoarse voice, roaring furiously:

"And I say, a prison! Geometry's a cage, that's what it is! Yes, a mousetrap! A prison!"

The hunchbacked monster tittered shrilly, repeating over and over some queer word I did not know. Then, suddenly, the mathematician yelled:

"To hell with you! Get out!"

While the visitor retreated down the hall, with an angry hissing and squealing, hurriedly wrapping himself in his broad cloak, the mathematician stopped in the doorway, a lank, fearful figure, clutching at his tangled hair, and wheezed:

"Euclid's a fool! A fool! I'll prove God has more brains than that fool Greek!"

Then he went in, banging the door so savagely that something in his room fell clattering to the floor.

This man, as I soon discovered, was attempting to prove the existence of God by means of higher mathematics. He died, however, without attaining his end.

Pletnyov worked in a printing office, as night proofreader for a newspaper. He earned eleven kopeks a night. If I did not manage to earn anything, we would live the day through on four pounds of bread, two kopeks' worth of tea, and three kopeks' worth of sugar. And I had very little time for earning money, because I had to study. Learning cost me tremendous labour. Particularly oppressive was the science of grammar, with its hideously narrow, ossified forms, into which I found myself utterly incapable of squeezing the Russian tongue—so alive and so difficult, so capriciously versatile. Soon, however, to my relief, we discovered that I had begun my studies "too early"—that, even should I pass the examinations for village teachers, I could not receive an appointment, because I was too young.

Pletnyov and I slept on the same cot—he in the daytime, I at night. When he got home, early in the morning, worn out by his night's work, his face swarthier than ever, his eyes inflamed, I would hurry off to the tavern for hot water—we had no samovar, of course—and then, at the table by the window, we would breakfast on bread and tea. Guri would reel off the news in the morning's paper, and recite the latest comic verses by a drunken columnist who signed himself "Red Domino." Guri always amazed me by his light attitude towards life. He treated life, it seemed to me, much as he did the fat-faced woman Galkina, procuress and trader in second-hand ladies' finery.

It was from this woman that he hired his little hole under the stairs. Having no money to pay for these "chambers," he paid instead in jokes, accordion music, and sentimental songs—delivered in a light tenor, with a glint of scorn in his eyes. The woman Galkina had been in the chorus at the opera in her youth, and knew how to value a tune. Not infrequently, she would be moved to tears. The tiny drops would roll profusely from her brazen eyes and down her puffy, purple cheeks—mark of the drunkard and the glutton. She would brush the tears from her cheeks with puffy fingers, then wipe her fingers carefully on a filthy handkerchief.

"Ah, Guri, Guri," she would exclaim, with a sigh. "You're a real artist! Yes, and if only you was a little better-looking, I'd fix things up for you. All the nice young youthses I've fixed up with women what has heartache from living all alone!"

One of these "youthses" lived just above us, in the attic. He was a student, the son of a furrier's helper: a young man of medium height, broad-chested, and with abnormally narrow hips. He looked like a triangle, poised on its apex, with the very tip of the apex chipped away. His feet were small as a woman's. His head, sunk deep between the shoulders, was also small, with a bristly cap of bright red hair. Bulging greenish eyes gleamed sombrely in his pale, bloodless face.

At the cost of untold effort, hungering like a homeless dog, he had succeeded, against his father's will, in getting through school and matriculating at the University. Then, however, discovering that he possessed a deep, velvety bass, he had conceived the desire to study singing.

With this as a bait, Galkina had netted him for one of her clients: a wealthy woman of the merchant class, about forty years old, with a son in his third year at the University and a daughter in her last year at school. The woman was gaunt and flat-chested, stiffly erect as a soldier, with the passionless face of an ascetic nun. Her big grey eyes were hidden in dark pits. She dressed always in black, with an old-fashioned silk kerchief on her head, and earrings set with stones of poison green.

Now and again, in the late evening or early morning, this woman would come to seek out her student. I often noticed her—plunging in at the gate, and striding determinedly across the yard. There was something fearful about her face: the lips, so compressed as to be almost out of sight; the eyes, despairing, hopeless, staring straight ahead—wide open, yet seeming blind. She could not be called ugly. It was her obvious tension that disfigured her, seeming to draw out her limbs and cruelly pinch her features.

"Look," Pletnyov would say. "She's like a woman insane."

The student hated and avoided her; and she pursued him as a spy might do, or some inexorable creditor.

"I'm a disgraced man," he would moan, when he had had some drink. "What do I want this singing for? They'll never let me near the stage, with such a mug and such a figure. They'll never let me near!"

"Drop the whole business," Pletnyov would advise.

"I know. But I'm sorry for her. Yes—I can't bear her, and yet I'm sorry for her! If you knew how she. . . ."

We knew. We had heard her by night, standing on the attic stairs and pleading dully, quaveringly:

"For the love of God. . . . Dear heart, for the love of God!"

She was the mistress of a big factory. She owned real estate, kept her own horses. She donated thousands of rubles to support a midwives' school. Like a beggar, she pleaded for the charity of love.

After breakfast Pletnyov would go to bed, and I would set out in search of work, returning only late in the evening, when it was time for him to leave for the printing office. If I brought food—bread, sausage, or perhaps boiled tripe—we would divide the spoils, and he would take his half to work with him.

When he was gone, I would wander about the halls and byways of our "Marusovka," observing curiously the lives of these, to me, new and unfamiliar people. The house was very crowded, a veritable anthill. It was pervaded with sour, caustic odours of indeterminate origin; and in every corner lurked heavy shadows, inimical to man. From morning to the late hours of the night, the buzz of life continued: the incessant chatter of the seamstresses' sewing machines; the trills of chorus girls from the operetta; the velvety bass of the attic student, rolling out his scales; the sonorous babble of a drink-ruined, half-crazed actor; the hysterical, drunken cries of the prostitutes. And there arose in my mind the question, natural, but unanswerable:

"What's the sense of it all?"

There was a man in the house, hanging about aimlessly among the starving youth: carroty hair, around a spreading bald spot; pot-belly, spindle legs, high cheekbones, and an enormous mouth, full of yellow horse teeth.

For these teeth, he had been nicknamed "Carroty Nag." He was involved in a lawsuit, now in its third year, against some relatives, merchants in Simbirsk; and he declared to all who would listen:

"Hope to die, but I'll ruin 'em, down to their last kopek! I'll beggar 'em, make 'em live on charity. And then, when they've had three years of it—then I'll give 'em back all I've won at law, I'll give it all back, and I'll say, 'Well, damn you! What do you say now?' That's what I'll do!"

"Is that your aim in life, Nag?" people asked; and he replied:

"I'm set on it, my whole heart's set on it. I can't even think about anything else!"

He spent his days at the district and superior courts, or in his lawyer's office. Of an evening, frequently, he would drive home in a cab, loaded with bags, bundles, bottles; and, in his filthy room, with sagging ceiling and crazy floor, he would arrange noisy feasts, inviting students, seamstresses—anyone who wanted a square meal and a little to drink with it. Himself, "Carroty Nag" drank nothing but rum, a beverage which left indelible dark-red stains on the tablecloth, on his clothes, even on the floor. After a few drinks, he would begin to wail:

"Birdies! Dear little birds! I love you! You're honest folk. Me, I'm a wicked scoundrel and a cr-r-rocodile! I'm trying to ruin my own relations, and I'll do it, too, honest to God, I will! Hope to die, but. . . ."

From his dolefully blinking eyes, the drunken tears would drip over his queer, ugly face. He would brush the tears from his cheeks with the palm of his hand, and dry his hand against his knees. His trousers were always covered with greasy stains.

"What sort of life do you live?" he would cry. "Hungry, and freezing, and rags on your backs. Is that right? What can you learn, living that way? Ah, if the tsar only knew the way you live. . . ."

And, pulling a handful of bright paper from his pocket, he would yell:

"Who needs money? Here, take it, brothers!"

The chorus girls and seamstresses would tear at the notes greedily, trying to wrest them from his hairy fist. Guffawing, he would protest:

"It's not for you! It's for the students!"

But the students never took his money.

"To hell with money!" the furrier's son would bellow angrily.

Once he himself, badly drunk, brought Pletnyov a bunch of ten-ruble notes, crumpled together into a compact ball, and said, flinging the money on to the table:

"There! Want it? I don't want it."

He lay down on our cot and began to sob and roar so wildly that we had to dash water over him, and force him to drink. When he fell asleep, Pletnyov tried to smooth out the money. But this turned out to be impossible. The notes were so tightly pressed together that they had to be thoroughly wetted before they could be separated.

A squalid, smoke-filled room, with windows opening on the brick wall of the house next door; crowded, airless, noisy, nightmarish, with "Nag" roaring loudest of all. I ask him:

"What makes you live here? Why not stay at a hotel?"

"Dear heart, for my soul! My soul feels warm, here with you."

The furrier's son agrees.

"Right, Nag! Me, too. I'd just be done for, any other place."

"Nag," begs Pletnyov:

"Play something. Give us a song."

And, with the gusli on his knees, Guri begins:

Rise, oh rise, bright sun, flushing
red the sky. . . .

His mellow voice pierces straight to the heart.

A hush falls over the room. The whole company sits pensively drinking in the plaintive words of the song, the low throbbing of the gusli strings.

"It's good, damn it!" the merchant woman's wretched consoler growls.

Among the strange dwellers of this old house, Guri Pletnyov, endowed with a wisdom the name of which is cheerfulness, played the part of the good genius of the fairy tales. His spirit, dyed in the vivid hues of youth, brightened existence with a constant fireworks of capital jokes, fine songs, witty ridicule of human customs and habits, and bold talk of the gross injustice of life. He was only just turned twenty, and looked a mere boy; yet all the people in the house regarded him as one to be turned to, when life pressed hard, for sober counsel; as one capable always of assisting, in one way or another. The better folk loved him; the worse, feared him. And even old policeman Nikiforich always smiled his false, fox smile on meeting Guri.

The "Marusovka" yard sloped upward, opening on two streets: Ribnoryadskaya and, further uphill, Staro-Gorshechnaya. On the latter, in a cosy little niche not far from our gateway, stood Nikiforich's box.

He was the senior policeman in our neighbourhood—a tall, spare old man, with a bright array of medals on his chest. He had a clever face, a honey-sweet smile, and crafty eyes.

Nikiforich evinced considerable interest in our noisy colony of past and prospective humans. Several times in the course of the day, his neat-hewn figure would appear in the gateway. Advancing unhurriedly through the yard, he would peer in at every window, much like a caretaker in a zoo making the rounds of the cages. During the winter, two of our residents were arrested: Smirnov, a one-armed officer, and Muratov, a private. Both had participated in Skobelev's Akhal-Teke expedition, and wore the St. George Cross. They were charged—with Zobnin, Ovsyankin, Grigoryev, Krylov, and others—with attempting to set up a secret printing shop, for which purpose, one Sunday, in broad daylight, Muratov and Smirnov had tried to steal some type from Klyuchnikov's printing office, on one of the city's busy streets. It was there that they were caught. And at the "Marusovka," one night, the gendarmes seized a lanky, sombre-looking man whom I had nicknamed "Wandering Belfry." Learning of this next morning, Guri said to me, rumpling his black hair excitedly:

"Look here, Maximich—thirty-seven devils! —run as fast as you can. . . ."

And, after explaining where I was to run, he added:

"Only take care! There might be spies around."

Highly pleased by this mysterious mission, I sped off, swift as a martin, to the Admiralty district. Here, in a coppersmith's dark shop, I found a curly-headed young man with remarkably blue eyes. He was working on a copper pan; but—he had not the look of a worker. In the far corner, an old man, his white hair bound back with a strip of leather, stood over a vise, doing something to a tap.

I asked:

"Any work here?"

The old coppersmith answered gruffly:

"Work enough. But not for you."

The young man threw a swift glance at me, then bent his head over his work again. Furtively, I jogged his foot with mine. He turned his blue eyes on me in wrathful amazement, grasping his copper pan by the handle as though about to hurl it at me. Noticing my wink, however, he said tranquilly:

"Get out, get out."

I winked again, and left the shop. Outside the door, I stopped to wait. The curly-headed coppersmith got up, stretched his cramped limbs, and came out after me. Lighting a cigarette, he turned to me in silent expectation.

"Are you Tikhon?"

"That's right."

"Pyotr's arrested."

His brows knit angrily. His eyes searched mine.

"What are you talking about? What Pyotr?"

"A lanky fellow. Looks like a deacon."

"Well?"

"That's all."

"But what have Pyotr, and the deacon, and all the rest of your rigmarole to do with me?" the coppersmith demanded; and the very form of his question confirmed me in my conviction that this man was no ordinary worker. I hurried home, proud of my success in carrying out Guri's commission. Such was my first participation in affairs "conspiratorial."

Guri Pletnyov was connected with these affairs; but to my requests for initiation he would only reply:

"You're young yet, brother. You just keep to your books."

Then Yevreinov introduced me to a rather mysterious individual—an introduction ringed around with such precautions as to make me look forward to something really significant. To accomplish it, Yevreinov took me out to the Arskoye Polye, a big open field beyond the city limits, warning me all the way that the acquaintance I was about to contract called for the most tremendous caution on my part; that it must be kept a secret. Finally, he pointed out a little grey figure, strolling slowly across the deserted field some distance away, and whispered, with a preliminary glance over his shoulder:

"There he is. Follow him, and when he stops, go up and say, 'I'm from out of town.' "

The mysterious is always alluring; but here it seemed to me absurd: a bright, hot day; and, like a grey grass stalk in the field, this lone, swaying human figure—nothing more. Overtaking him at the cemetery gate, I found myself confronting a youth with small, fleshless features and stern eyes, round as a bird's. He wore the grey uniform coat of a Gymnasium student; but its bright metal buttons had been replaced by black ones, of bone. On his shabby cap, too, there was a dark spot where the Gymnasium emblem had formerly been attached. Altogether, there was something prematurely pinched about him—as though he were impatient to seem to himself really grown-up.

We sat down among the graves, in the shade of some thick bushes. His manner of speech was cold and businesslike. I did not like him, nor anything about him. After sternly questioning me as to what reading I had done, he invited me to join a study circle he had organized. I agreed. Then we parted. He left first, after a wary glance over the empty field.

There were only four or five of us in this circle. I was the youngest; and I lacked entirely the background of training necessary for a study of John Stuart Mill, or of Chernyshevsky's annotations to him. We met in the rooms of a certain Milovsky—a normal school student, later to become a writer of short stories, to which he signed the pen name Yeleonsky. When he had written something like five volumes, he committed suicide. How many of the people I have known have abandoned life by their own choice!

Milovsky was a quiet man, timid of thought and cautious of speech. He lived in the basement of a squalid house, working at the joiner's trade "for equilibrium of body and soul." He was dull company. As to Mill, the study of his book could not absorb me. The fundamental propositions of economics soon appeared to me extremely familiar. I had mastered them by direct experience, carried their record on my skin. And there seemed to me to be no need for writing big books, full of hard words, about things that were perfectly clear to anyone who laboured that "others"—not he—might live in ease and comfort. It was a great strain, for me, to sit out two and three hours at a stretch in this basement hole, breathing the smell of joiner's glue and watching the wood lice crawl over the dirty walls.

One day our preceptor failed to appear at the usual hour. Thinking that he would not come at all, we clubbed together for a little treat: a bottle of vodka and some bread and cucumbers. But suddenly his grey-clad legs twinkled rapidly past the window, and we barely had time to thrust the vodka under the table before he joined us. While he went about his explanations of Chernyshevsky's scholarly conclusions, we all sat stiff as fools, afraid to move, trembling lest one of us upset the bottle with his foot. In the end, it was our teacher who upset it. Hearing it tumble over, he glanced under the table—and did not say a word. Ah, how much easier would we have felt, had he cursed us roundly!

His silence, his set face, the deep injury in his narrowed eyes, made me terribly uncomfortable. I glanced furtively at my comrades' shame-flushed faces, feeling criminally guilty towards our preceptor, and genuinely sorry for him, though the purchase of the vodka had not been my idea.

I was bored at these sessions. I wanted to get away and wander about the Tatar quarter. Here a good-humoured and friendly folk lived a queer, cleanly life of their own. These people spoke a comically distorted Russian. When evening fell, the strange calls of the muezzins, sounding from lofty minarets, would summon them to prayer. The Tatars' whole life, it seemed to me, was ordered differently, unfamiliarly, bearing no resemblance to the life I knew, the life that did not make me happy.

I was drawn to the Volga, too—drawn by the music of labour. To this day that music fills my heart with a pleasant intoxication; and I well remember the hours when I first tasted of labour's heroic poetry.

A big barge loaded with Persian wares ran on to a rock, a little below Kazan, and injured its bottom. I was taken on by a stevedores' artel hired to unload the cargo. It was September, and a sharp wind was blowing downstream, driving a chilly rain before it. The waves leaped shrewishly, all along the grey river, with the wind tearing fiercely at their crests. Our artel, some fifty men, settled down on the deck of an empty barge, huddling glumly under tarpaulins and sacking; and we were towed downstream by a puffy little steam tug, which kept throwing out into the rain red sheaves of sparks.

Evening gathered. Darkening, the soggy, leaden sky sank low over the river. The stevedores grumbled and swore, cursing rain, and wind, and life. Slothfully, they crept about the deck, seeking shelter from the cold and damp. Surely, it seemed to me, these sleepy creatures were unfit to do the work before them. They could never save the sinking cargo.

Towards midnight, we reached the shallows and made fast to the damaged barge. The artel leader—a venomous old man, pockmarked, wily, foul-tongued, with the eyes and beak-nose of a kite—pulled his drenched cap from his bald skull and cried in a high womanish voice:

"Prayers, boys!"

The stevedores bunched together on the deck, a black bulk in the grey night, and began a bearish rumbling. The leader, finishing his prayers before the rest, shrilled:

"Lanterns! Now, lads, show what you can do! The real thing, little ones! With God's help, begin!"

And these slow, slothful, rain-soaked men began to "show what they could do." As though into battle—whooping, yelling, joking—they threw themselves on to the deck and into the holds of the sinking barge. Sacks of rice, and bales of raisins, hides, and karakul, went flying through the air around me, light as down. Thickset figures ran past, urging one another on with howls and whistles and pungent oaths. It was hard to believe that such gay ease and skill could be displayed by the same glum, sluggish beings who had only just been drearily complaining of life, of the rain and cold. The rain grew chiller, heavier.

The wind increased, tugging at our shirts, blowing them up over our heads, baring our bellies. Through the wet murk, by the light of six dim lanterns, the black figures rushed on and on, with a dull thud of feet on the decks of the barges. They worked as though they had been famishing for labour, as though they had long been pining for the joy of hurling four-pood sacks from hand to hand, of racing along with bales of goods on their shoulders. They worked as though playing, with the gay enthusiasm of children, with that intoxicating zest of labour, than which only a woman's embrace can be more sweet.

A big, bearded man, wet and slippery, in a full-skirted coat—the owner of the cargo, probably; or perhaps his agent—yelled suddenly, at the top of his voice:

"Hey, mates! A pail for you! Hey, pirates, two pails! Get the job done!"

Voices from every side roared back at him through the darkness:

"Three pails!"

"Three goes! Get the job done!"

And the whirlwind of labour swept on with renewed force.

I, too, grabbed sacks, dragged, hurled, ran, grabbed again. And it seemed to me that I, and everything about me, had been caught up in some wild and furious dance; that these people were capable of carrying on their gay, stupendous work, unflagging, unsparing of energy, for months—for years; that they were capable, should they set their hands to the belfries and minarets, of dragging the very city from its site to whatever place they might desire.

I tasted that night of a joy which I had never before experienced. My heart flamed in the wish that all of life might be spent in such semi-insane ecstasy of labour. Down below, the waves were dancing. The rain still swept the decks, and the wind whined over the river. And through the grey dusk of dawn these wet, half-naked men continued their race, swift and tireless, shouting, laughing, glorying in their strength and labour. And then—and then the wind rent in two the leaden mass of cloud, and a rosy sunbeam flashed across a bright blue patch of sky. The gay brutes greeted it with a roar of welcome, tossing up their grinning muzzles, framed in the wet wool of hair and beards. I wanted to hug them, these two-legged beasts, so skilled and clever in their work, so utterly absorbed in it.

Nothing, I felt, could withstand the onslaught of this joyously infuriate force. It could work miracles upon the earth, could cover all the land overnight with wondrous palaces and cities, as the prophetic tales of magic tell. For a moment or two, the sunbeam looked on at man's labour; then, failing in its contest with the vast bulk of the clouds, it drowned in their depths like a child in the sea. The rain became a downpour.

"Knock off!" someone shouted; but he was answered savagely:

"Who says knock off?"

And until two o'clock in the afternoon, when the last of the cargo was shifted, the men worked on without pause, half-naked in the pouring rain and biting wind, impressing upon me a reverent realization of the mighty strength in which our human world is rich.

The work done, we all boarded the tug, and there fell asleep like drunken men. And when we reached Kazan, we poured out over the sandy beach in a grey, muddy stream, and headed for the tavern to drink down three pails of vodka.

Thief Bashkin came up to me there, looked me over, and asked:

"What have they been doing to you?"

Rapturously, I told him of the work. He listened, then, sighing, said contemptuously:

"Fool. Worse than a fool. Idiot!"

Whistling some tune, he drifted off through the close-set rows of tables, at which the stevedores were already feasting noisily. A tenor voice, off in the corner, struck up an obscene song:

Hey, it happened in the middle of the night,
dark night.
There was a lady went awalking in her
garden, hey!

Half a score of voices roared deafeningly, with a beating of palms on the table tops:

The watchman watching through the night,
He saw a pretty little sight....

Loud guffaws, whistles. And the walls shook to words unequalled, probably, anywhere on earth for reckless cynicism.

Somebody introduced me to Andrei Derenkov, the proprietor of a small grocery shop tucked away at the end of a narrow, poverty-stricken street, beside a garbage-filled gully.

Derenkov was a little man with a withered arm; with a kindly face, framed in a fair beard, and intelligent eyes. He owned Kazan's finest library of rare and forbidden literature, a collection used by students from the city's numerous educational institutions and by various other revolutionary-minded people.

The grocery shop was in a low ell projecting from a house owned by a Skopets* money-lender. From the shop, a door led to a big room, scantily lit by a window opening on to the yard. This room, in turn, led to a cramped kitchen; and beyond the kitchen, in a corner of the dark hallway between the ell and the house, there was a little storeroom, housing the iniquitous library. Some of the books were hand-written copies, in thick notebooks.

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* *Skopets*—one of the Skoptsy, a religious sect practising castration.—*Tr.*

Such were Lavrov's *Historical Letters*, Chernyshevsky's *What Is To Be Done?*, several articles by Pisarev, *King Hunger,* and *Intricate Workings*. All these manuscript copies were crumpled and worn—read almost to tatters.

When I came to the shop for the first time, Derenkov, occupied with customers, nodded at the inner door. Entering the big, half-dark room, I saw a little old man on his knees in the icon corner, praying fervently. He reminded me of a portrait of Serafim, the Sarov hermit. And, as I stood watching him, a sense of something wrong came over me—a sense of contradiction.

Derenkov had been described to me as a "Narodnik." To my understanding, a Narodnik was a revolutionary; and a revolutionary should not believe in God. The devout old man seemed to me out of place in this home.

His prayers done, he smoothed down his white hair and beard, looked hard at me, and said:

"I'm Andrei's father. And who may you be?... Oh, so that's it! And I took you for a student in disguise."

"Why should a student go around in disguise?" I asked.

"Well, that's so," the old man responded quietly. "After all, no matter how you disguise yourself, God will know!"

He disappeared into the kitchen. I sat down by the window, and was soon absorbed in thought. Then, suddenly, I heard someone exclaim:

"So that's what he's like!"

A girl, dressed all in white, was leaning against the frame of the kitchen door. Her fair hair had been cropped short, and her chubby face was pale. A smile shone in her dark-blue eyes. She was very like an angel, as angels are represented in cheap prints.

"What are you frightened at? Am I such a dreadful sight?" she asked. Her voice was thin and quavering. Slowly, cautiously, she advanced towards me, clinging to the wall, as though the solid floor underfoot were a swaying rope stretched over empty space. And this inability to walk seemed to heighten her resemblance to a being from another world. Her whole body quivered, as though needles were driving into the soles of her feet; as though the wall stung her chubby, childish hands. Her fingers were queerly immobile.

I stood dumbly before her, strangely embarrassed, keenly pitying. How unusual everything was in this dim room!

The girl sat down on a chair, cautiously as though she feared it might fly away from under her. Simply, as no one ever does, she told me that she had only begun to move about in the last four or five days, after losing the use of her limbs and being bedridden for almost three months.

"It's a sort of nervous ailment," she said, smiling.

I wished, as I remember, that her condition could have been somehow otherwise explained. A nervous ailment—it was too prosaic for such a girl as this, and in so strange a room, a room where everything seemed to press back timidly to the walls, and the icon lamp in the corner burned too bright, and the shadows of its copper chains, falling across the white cloth on the big dinner table, swayed and shifted without apparent cause.

"I've heard a lot about you, and I wanted to see what you were like," the childishly thin voice went on.

I felt uncomfortable, somehow—uncomfortable almost beyond endurance—under the gaze that this girl turned on me. There was something, behind the dark blue of her eyes, that seemed to read me through and through. I could not talk with a girl like this. I did not know how. And I stood there silently, looking at the pictures on the walls: Herzen, Darwin, Garibaldi.

A youngster of about my age, with tow-coloured hair and insolent eyes, darted in from the shop and out again to the kitchen, calling as he passed us, in a boy's changing voice:

"What're you doing down here, Maria?"

"That's my youngest brother, Alexei," the girl told me. "I've been studying, you know. To be a midwife. Only I took sick. Why don't you say anything? Are you bashful?"

Andrei Derenkov came in, his withered arm thrust into the bosom of his jacket. He stroked his sister's silky hair, tousling it gently, and began to question me as to the sort of work I was seeking.

Then a slender girl with fiery red curls and greenish eyes came in and glanced at me severely. She took the white-clad girl by the arm and led her away, declaring:

"That's enough, Maria."

The name did not suit. It was too coarse.

I also left, strangely excited. Two days later, evening brought me once more to this room, eager to understand what sort of life people lived here, what its meaning might be. It was all very queer.

The meek, lovable old man, Stepan Ivanovich, white-headed, pale almost to transparency, sat in a corner of the room, gently smiling, moving his dark lips—seeming to plead:

"Let me be!"

He was possessed by a constant fear, an anxious foreboding of calamity. That I saw clearly.

Shrunken-armed Andrei, in a grey jacket stiff as a board at the chest with flour and oil, moved about the room sidewise, diffidently, with the apologetic smile of a child who has just been forgiven some harmless prank. He was helped in the shop by Alexei—a coarse, lazy youngster. The third brother, Ivan, was a student at the normal school, and lived in the dormitory there, coming home only on holidays. Ivan was a neatly-dressed, neatly-combed little man, reminiscent of some aging government clerk. Maria, the ailing sister, lived up in the attic somewhere, and seldom ventured down the stairs. When she did come down, I always felt uncomfortable, as though fettered by invisible bonds.

The Derenkovs' household was managed by a tall, lean woman with the face of a wooden doll and the stern eyes of an embittered nun, who lived with their Skopets landlord. She was helped by her daughter, redheaded, sharp-nosed Nastya. When Nastya turned her greenish eyes on any man, her nostrils would begin to quiver.

The real masters in the Derenkovs' home, however, were the students—students from the University, from the Theological Academy, from the veterinary institute: a noisy assemblage of young men whose thoughts were full of solicitude for the Russian people, of unceasing anxiety for Russia's future. Aroused by articles in the day's newspapers, by conclusions drawn in newly-read books, by town and University happenings, they would hasten to Derenkov's shop, of an evening, from all parts of Kazan, to plunge into furious argument, or whisper quietly in corners of the room. They would come with big books; and, jabbing excited fingers into the pages, they would shout at one another, affirming each whatever truths he found most true.

I could make very little, of course, of these arguments. The debated truths would be lost for me in the profusion of words, as the rare globules of fat are lost in the watery soups of the poor. Some of the students reminded me of the grey-bearded dogmaticians of the religious sects along the Volga. But here, I realized, I had found people whose aim it was to change our life—to change and improve it; and, though their sincerity might gasp and splutter in a torrential flow of words—it did not drown in this torrent. It was clear to me what problems they sought to solve: problems in the successful solution of which I felt a strong personal interest and concern. The students' talk, it often seemed to me, gave utterance to my own inarticulate thoughts;

and I regarded these people almost with worship, as a captive may regard those who promise him freedom.

They, for their part, looked upon me much as a cabinet-maker upon a piece of wood which, he feels, may be worked up into something not altogether ordinary.

"A native talent," one student would say, introducing me to another, with the same pride with which a street urchin shows off to his comrades a copper coin found in the gutter. I did not like to be called "a native talent," "a son of the people." I felt that I was a stepson of life. At times, too, I was sorely oppressed by the arbitrary way in which these new forces guided my mental development. Thus, one day I noticed in a bookshop window a volume entitled *Aphorisms and Maxims*. Though I did not know the meaning of these words, I was seized with a sudden eager desire to read the book, and asked a student from the Theological Academy to lend me a copy.

"What next?" was the ironical response of the future archbishop, a young man with the head of a Negro: close-curled hair, thick lips, and gleaming white teeth. "That's nonsense, brother. You read what you're given, and don't go poking your nose where it doesn't belong."

My teacher's rude tone stung me to the quick. I bought the book, of course, earning part of the money at the wharves and borrowing the rest from Andrei Derenkov. I have it still: the first serious book I ever purchased.

Altogether, the treatment I received was quite severe. Reading the *Alphabet of Social Sciences*, I felt that the author exaggerated the importance of the pastoral tribes in furthering civilization, and undeservedly slighted those enterprising wanderers, the hunters. I expressed this feeling to one of my mentors, a student of philology—and for the next hour, working hard to keep his womanish features set in stern disapproval, he lectured me on "the right to criticize."

"To have the right to criticize, a person must believe in some definite truth. What truth do you believe in?" he demanded.

This student was always reading—even in the street. I often saw him moving down the sidewalk, his face buried in a book, jostling all who crossed his path. Tossing in the hunger fever, typhus, in his garret room, he shouted in delirium:

"Morality must harmoniously combine the elements of freedom and compulsion! Harmoniously! Har-har-harm. . . ."

A tender-hearted man, weakly with systematic undernourishment, worn with persistent seeking of stable truth, he knew no pleasures in life other than books; and when it seemed to him that he had reconciled the contradictions between some two powerful minds, his soft, dark eyes would glow in a smile of childlike happiness. Some ten years after our acquaintance in Kazan, I met him again in Kharkov, where he was continuing his university course after a five-year term of exile in Kem; and he impressed me as a man living in a teeming anthill of conflicting ideas. Mortally ill with tuberculosis, spitting blood, he attempted to reconcile Nietzsche with Marx. Gripping my hands between his clammy palms, he wheezed:

"Life without synthesis—it's impossible!"

He died in a street car, on the way to the University.

I have met no few such martyrs in the cause of reason. I hold their memory sacred.

A score or so of people of this sort would gather at the Derenkovs'. There was even a Japanese among them: Panteleimon Sato, a student at the Theological Academy. Now and again, at these gatherings, I noticed a big, broad-chested man, with shaven head—Tatar fashion—and a full, flowing beard. He seemed tightly sewn up, this man, into his long grey coat, which he kept always hooked to the very chin. He generally sat in some corner by himself, puffing at his short-stemmed pipe and turning his grey eyes in quiet contemplation on the people in the room. His close, attentive gaze frequently lingered on my face. I felt that I was being weighed in this man's grave thoughts, and, somehow, I was afraid of him. His silence puzzled me. Everyone else talked loudly, volubly, positively; and, of course, the more trenchant the talk, the better I liked it. It was a long time before I began to guess how often trenchant words are but an outer guise for mean and hypocritical thoughts. What lay behind this bearded giant's silence?

They called him "Khokhol." None but Andrei, I believe, knew his real name. Soon I discovered that this man had only recently returned from the Yakutsk region, where he had spent ten years in exile. This increased my interest in him; but it did not embolden me to make his acquaintance. And yet, I was not afflicted either with bashfulness or with timidity. On the contrary, I was smitten with an eager, restless curiosity, a craving to know everything—to know it as quickly as possible: a quality which, all my life, has hampered me in serious study of any one thing at a time.

When they talked of the people, I would listen wonderingly, mistrustful of my own conclusions, yet feeling that on this topic I could not think as they did. To them, the people represented the embodiment of wisdom, kindness, and spiritual beauty; an embodiment all but godlike, the source of all that is lofty, just, sublime. I did not see the people in any such light. I saw about me carpenters, stevedores, bricklayers; I knew Yakov, Osip, Grigori. But here the talk was of the people as one whole. The speakers set themselves somewhere below this people, considered themselves dependent on its will. To me, however, it seemed that all the beauty, all the power of intellect were embodied precisely in these speakers, who concentrated in themselves, kept burning in their hearts a warm and beneficent will to live, to build life freely in accordance with new canons of love for humanity.

This love was a thing I had never observed in the petty beings among whom I had lived thus far. Here, it rang in every word, shone in every glance.

The talk of these people-worshippers fell on my heart like a refreshing rain; and I was greatly helped by naive literature on the sombre life of the countryside, on the peasant's martyrdom. Only in strong, in passionate love for humankind, I began to feel, could one draw the power to seek out and to comprehend the real significance of life. I stopped thinking about myself, and became more attentive to others.

Trustfully, Andrei Derenkov explained to me that the modest income his shop brought in was entirely devoted to the assistance of believers in the creed: "the people's happiness above all else." And he bore himself, when among them, much like a genuinely pious sexton at services conducted by an archbishop. He made no effort to conceal his admiration of the bookmen's ready wisdom. His withered arm thrust into the bosom of his jacket, his face lit with a happy smile, he would demand of me, jerking at his silky beard:

"Isn't it fine? Isn't it, now?"

And when Lavrov, the veterinary—distinguished by a strange voice, like the cackle of a goose—launched into heretical argument against the Narodniks, Derenkov would drop his eyes and whisper, horrified:

"Such a trouble-maker!"

Derenkov's attitude towards the Narodniks was akin to mine; but the students' treatment of him seemed to me rude and inconsiderate: the attitude of aristocrats towards a servant, towards a tavern flunkey. Derenkov himself did not notice this. Often, when the visitors left, he would invite me to stay the night. We would put the place to rights, and then, stretching out on some felt matting on the floor, lie whispering far into the night, the darkness of the room around us barely relieved by the faint glow of the icon lamp in the corner. With the tranquil joy of true belief, he would say to me:

"In time we'll have hundreds of such good folk, thousands of them. They'll fill all the leading posts, all over Russia, and then they'll change our whole life, fast enough."

Some ten years my elder, he was strongly attracted, I could see, to redheaded Nastya. He tried to keep from looking into her teasing eyes, and in the presence of others assumed towards her the dry and authoritative tone of employer to servant. But he would look after her longingly; and, when alone with her, would speak with a timid and apologetic smile, tugging nervously at his beard.

His young sister, too, would watch the verbal battles from some corner of the room, her eyes wide and her childlike face pouting comically in the effort of attention. When sharper words than usual rang out, she would draw a quick, loud breath, as though she had been suddenly spattered with icy water. There was a sandy-haired medical student who liked to pace up and down—a solemn cockerel—near her corner. When he talked to her, he would lower his voice to a mysterious half-whisper, and draw his brows together impressively. It was all extraordinarily interesting.

But—autumn drew on, and life without steady employment became impossible. Carried away by all my new-found interests, I had begun to earn less and less, depending on others for my daily bread; and others' bread is always hard to swallow. It was time I sought a "place" for the winter. I found such a place in Vasili Semyonov's pretzel bakery.

This period of my life I have outlined in the stories *The Master, Konovalov, Twenty-Six and One*. A miserable time! But an instructive one.

Miserable physically; and morally, more miserable still.

When I went down into the basement bakery, a "wall of forgetfulness" grew up between me and the people whose company and guidance had by now become essential to me. None of them ever came to see me at the bakery. Working fourteen hours a day, I was unable to visit the Derenkovs on weekdays; and on holidays I either slept or spent the time with my bakery comrades. Of these, some very soon came to regard me as an amusing fool, while others bestowed on me the naive affection children form for one who tells them fascinating tales. The devil alone knows what I found to say to these people; but, of course, I did my utmost to inspire in them the hope that another life might be possible—a life less burdensome, a life that would have sense and purpose. Sometimes I was successful; and, seeing the gleam of human sadness dawn in their bloated faces, seeing the spark of wrath and indignation flash in their eyes, I would rejoice, with the proud thought that I was "working among the people," "enlightening" them.

More often, however—naturally enough—I found myself impotent, lacking in knowledge, at a loss to answer even the most elementary questions posed by life, by our environment. Then I would feel that I had been cast into a murky pit, where human beings groped like blindworms—where they strove only to forget reality, and found the forgetfulness they sought in drink, or in the chill embrace of prostitutes.

A visit to the brothels was the unbreakable rule, on payday every month. They would dream aloud of this pleasure for a whole week before the happy day; and when it was over, would recount to one another at great length the delights experienced. In such talks they would boast lewdly of their virility, and make brutal mock of the women, spitting disgustedly when they spoke of them.

And yet—strange!—behind all this I heard, or thought I heard, sorrow and shame. In the "houses of solace," where for a ruble one could buy a woman for the whole night, my comrades, I saw, felt awkward, apologetic; and that seemed to me only natural. Some, again, were jaunty to excess, with a swagger which, I sensed, was counterfeit, deliberately put on. Poignantly interested in the relations between the sexes, I observed all this with heightened insight. I had not yet experienced woman's caresses; and my continued abstinence put me into an unpleasant position, both the women and my comrades mocking at me maliciously. Soon my comrades stopped inviting me to the "houses of solace." Bluntly, they told me:

"Better not come with us, brother."

"Why?"

"Because. It's uncomfortable, with you around."

I seized eagerly upon these words, feeling that they held something of real importance to me; but I could get no clearer explanation.

"What a fellow! We've told you once—don't come! It's dull, with you around."

Only Artem remarked, with a wry smile:

"Like as if a priest was there, or a fellow's own father."

The girls, at first, poked fun at my restraint. Later, they began to ask resentfully:

"Think you're too good for us?"

Teresa Boruta, a plump, attractive Polish "girl" of forty, "housekeeper" of the establishment, watching me with the clever eyes of a purebred dog, said:

"Let's not bother him, girls. He's got a sweetheart, surely. Isn't that so? A nice, strong lad like that—it's a sweetheart, surely, holds him back. What else?"

An alcoholic, going off into desperate drinking bouts, she was unspeakably repulsive when drunk. When sober, however, she would amaze me by her contemplative attitude towards other people, by her tranquil way of seeking logic in their doings.

"The hardest folk to understand are the Academy students, surely. Yes, that's so," she told my comrades. "What they'll do to a girl! Have the floor soaped, and make a naked girl get down on all fours, with her hands and feet on china plates, and give her a push behind, to see how far she'll slide. And then another girl, and then another. Yes. What for?"

"You're lying!" I declared.

"Oh, no, I'm not!" Teresa exclaimed, tranquil and unoffended; and there was something very depressing in her tranquillity.

"You made it up!"

"How could a girl make up a thing like that? Or do you think I'm crazy?" she demanded, staring wide-eyed at me.

People were listening to our argument with avid interest. And Teresa talked on, describing the sports of the guests in the passionless tone of a person seeking only one thing: to understand, What for?

The listeners spat their loathing, heaped savage curses on the students. But I—I saw only that Teresa was sowing enmity towards those whom I had learned to love with all my heart; and I replied that the students loved the people, that they wished to help the people.

"Those are the students from Voskresenskaya Street—the laymen, from the University. But the ones I mean—they're the churchmen, from Arskoye Polye. They're all orphans, those church students, and an orphan—he surely grows up to be a thief, or a mischief-maker—a bad man he grows up to be. Because an orphan, he's got nothing to hold him back."

The "housekeeper's" calm tales, and the girls' angry complaints against students, government clerks, and "washed folk" generally, aroused in my comrades, besides hatred and repulsion, another feeling, very close to joy—a feeling expressed in the words:

"So the educated folk are worse than we are!"

It was painful to me, and bitter, to hear such talk. Into these dark little rooms, I began to see, as into cesspools, all the filth of the town came seeping, to boil up over a foul, smoky flame, and, saturated with enmity and malice, to go flowing back once more into the city. In these cramped holes, to which people were driven by animal instinct and the tedium of life, I witnessed the transformation of absurd turns of speech into touching songs of love's torments and trials; witnessed the inception of ugly fictions about the lives of "educated folk," the inculcation of contempt and hostility towards that which is not understood. And it became clear to me that the "houses of solace" were a sort of university, in which my comrades acquired learning of the most venomous nature.

I watched the "girls for delight," shuffling lazily across the filthy floor—their flabby flesh quivering abominably to the insistent squeal of an accordion or the nerve-racking rattle and twang of a dilapidated piano. And as I watched, new thoughts, vague, but disturbing, grew up in my mind. Everything around me emanated tedium, poisoning the spirit with an impotent desire to get away.

In the bakery, when I began to talk of those who were devotedly seeking roads to freedom and happiness for the people, I would hear in reply:

"Ah, but the girls tell different tales about them!"

I would be ridiculed mercilessly, with angry cynicism. But I was a rebellious pup. I felt that my wisdom was no less, and my courage greater, than the wisdom and courage of the older beasts. And I, too, would grow angry. Thinking about life, I had begun to realize, was a thing no easier than life itself; and there were times when I felt passionate fits of hatred towards these doggedly patient folk with whom I worked. I was exasperated, above all, by their capacity of patient endurance, by the hopeless resignation with which they submitted to our drunken employer's half-insane indignities.

And—it would so happen!—it was just at this trying time that I came in contact with an idea that was altogether new to me: an idea which, though fundamentally alien to my nature, nontheless disturbed me greatly.

On one of those stormy nights when it seems as though the grey sky itself, rent into infinitesimal shreds by the viciously whining wind, were sifting down to bury the world beneath high drifts of powdered ice; when the earth's term of life seems ended, and the sun quenched never to rise again—on such a Shrovetide night I was making my way home to the bakery, from the Derenkovs'. The wind in my face, I pushed with closed eyes through the grey, turbidly seething chaos. Suddenly I stumbled and fell. There was a man lying in the snow, right across the sidewalk, and I had caught my foot against him. We both swore —I in Russian, he in French:

"O, diable!"

That seemed curious to me. I pulled the man up, and set him on his feet—a little fellow, short, and of no great weight. Jerking at my arm, he shouted wrathfully:

"My hat, damn you! Give me back my hat! I'll freeze!"

I found his hat in the snow, shook it clean, and thrust it down on to his bristly head. But he tore it off and began to wave it about, cursing in two languages and shouting at me:

"Get away!"

All at once he darted ahead, and was swallowed up in the seething mess. But after a while I came on him again, under an extinguished street lamp. Clinging to the wooden lamp-post, he was saying earnestly:

"Lena, I'm dying.... Oh, Lena!"

He was evidently drunk. Most probably, he would have frozen, had I left him in the street. I asked him where he lived.

"What street is this?" he cried tearfully. "I don't know which way to go."

I put my arm around him and led him away, asking again where he lived.

"On the Bulak," he mumbled, shivering. "On the Bulak.... There's a bath-house there ... a house...."

He set his feet down uncertainly, stumbling and lurching, making it hard for me to walk. I could hear his teeth chatter.

"Si tu savais," he mumbled, pushing against me.

"I don't understand."

He stopped short, raised his hand, and pronounced distinctly—as it seemed to me, with pride:

"Si tu savais où je te mène...."

He thrust his fingers into his mouth;

staggered, and almost fell. I got down on my heels and hoisted him on to my back. As I carried him off, he muttered again, with his chin pressing down on my skull:

"*Si tu savais*.... But I'm freezing. Oh, Lord!"

When we reached the Bulak, I had to ask him over and over to point out where he lived. At length we stumbled into the entry of a little building hidden in whirling snow at the back of a courtyard. He groped his way to the inner door, and tapped lightly, whispering to me:

"Ssh! Quiet!"

The door was opened by a woman in a red dressing-gown, with a lighted candle in her hand. Moving silently aside to let us pass, she produced a lorgnette from some fold or pocket in her gown, and began to examine me through it.

I told her that the man's hands seemed to be frozen, that he must be undressed and put to bed.

"Yes?" she asked. Her voice was rich and youthfully clear.

"His hands should be bathed in cold water."

Silently, with her lorgnette, she pointed to a corner of the room. There was nothing in the corner but an easel, and, on the easel, a painting: a river, and trees. Puzzled, I looked more closely into the woman's face. It was strangely immobile. She moved away from me to another corner, where, on a table, a lamp glowed under a pink shade. Here she sat down. Taking up a jack of hearts from the table, she began examining it intently.

"Have you any vodka?" I asked, very loud. She did not answer. She was busily laying out cards on the table. The man sat on a chair, his head bowed on his chest, his red hands hanging limply. I laid him down on a couch and began to undress him. I could not understand what was happening. I felt like someone in a dream. The wall over the couch was entirely concealed by an array of photographs; and among the photographs the light picked out a dull gold wreath, wound with white ribbon. In gilt letters, at the end of the ribbon, I read:

FOR THE INCOMPARABLE GILDA

"Careful, damn you!" the man groaned, when I began to chafe his hands.

The woman laid out her cards, absorbed and silent. Her sharp nose gave a somewhat birdlike look to her face, which was lit by a pair of big, unshifting eyes. Now she lifted her hands, the hands of an adolescent girl, to fluff her grey hair—so airily arranged as almost to seem a wig. Low, but very clearly, she asked:

"Did you see Misha, Georges?"

Georges sat up quickly, pushing me aside, and answered with uneasy haste:

"Why, but you know he's gone to Kiev."

"Yes, to Kiev," the woman repeated, her eyes fixed on her cards; and I noticed that her voice was entirely devoid of expression, of inflection.

"He'll be back soon. . . ."

"Yes?"

"Oh, yes! Very soon."

"Yes?" the woman repeated.

Half undressed as he was, Georges sprang up from the couch and hurried to her side. Kneeling at her feet, he said something in French.

"I'm quite composed," she replied in Russian.

"You know—I lost my way. Such a storm of snow, and a tremendous wind. I thought I'd freeze," Georges told her hurriedly, stroking her hand, which lay passively on her knee. He was a man of about forty. There was an anxious, frightened expression on his ruddy face, on the thick lips below the black moustache. He kept rubbing at the stiff grey bristle that covered his round skull; and his intoxication was fading rapidly.

"We're leaving for Kiev tomorrow," the woman said. It might have been a question. It might have been a declaration.

"That's right, tomorrow! And so you must rest now. Why don't you go to bed? It's very late."

"And Misha won't be here today?"

"Oh, no, no! There's such a storm. . . . Come, now, you must get some sleep."

He took the lamp from the table, and led her away, through a little door screened by a bookcase. For a long time I remained alone, my mind a blank, half-listening to his low, husky voice in the next room. Shaggy storm paws brushed against the window. On the floor, in a pool of melted snow, the reflected candle flame blinked timidly. The room was crowded with furniture. A strange, warm odour pervaded it, lulling the mind to sleep.

At length Georges reappeared, swaying, with the lamp in his hand. The lamp shade rattled against the glass of the chimney.

"She's gone to bed."

He set the lamp down on the table. He seemed sunk in thought. Pausing in the middle of the room, he began to speak; but he did not look at me.

"Well, what's to be said? I'd have been finished, I suppose, if it hadn't been for you.... Thanks! And—who are you?"

He tilted his head to one side and stood listening, starting nervously, to a faint rustle in the other room.

"Is that your wife?" I asked, very softly.

"Yes, my wife. My all. All that life holds for me!" this man said, slowly and quietly, staring at the floor. Again he began to rub his head.

"We ought to have some tea, eh?"

And he moved absently towards the door—but stopped, recalling that the servant girl had taken sick and been sent to the hospital.

I offered to heat the samovar. He nodded agreement, and—forgetting, evidently, that he was only partly dressed—shuffled barefoot across the wet floor to show me into the tiny kitchen. Here, leaning against the stove, he said again:

"I'd have been frozen, if it hadn't been for you. Thanks!"

And, starting, he stared at me with eyes that were wide with terror.

"What would have become of her, then? Good Lord!"

In a rapid whisper, his eyes turned to the dark hole that marked the doorway, he said:

"She's not well. You saw. She had a son—he was a musician, in Moscow—and he killed himself. But she keeps thinking he'll be coming home. It's almost two years, now."

Afterwards, while we were having our tea, he talked on—disconnectedly, in words one does not hear in ordinary conversation: of how she had been a country gentlewoman, and he a history teacher; how he had been engaged to tutor her son, and had fallen in love with her; how, for him, she had left her husband—a German, and a baron; how she had sung in the opera, and how happy they had been together, though the baron did everything in his power to poison life for her.

Telling me all this, he kept peering intently, through screwed-up eyes, at something in the shadows of the grimy kitchen, beyond the place, by the stove, where the floor had rotted through. He drank his tea so hot that it scalded him, and his face crinkled with pain. Then, his round eyes blinking anxiously—

"And—who are you?" he asked again. "Oh, yes. A bakery worker. In a pretzel place. That's queer. You don't seem to fit the part. Why is that?"

There was alarm in his voice, and mistrust in the glance he threw me: the look of a person trapped and baited.

Briefly, I told him something of my story.

"So that's how it is!" he exclaimed softly. "Ah, so that's how it is."

And, suddenly animated, demanded:

"That fairy tale—about the ugly duckling—I suppose you know it?"

His face twisted grotesquely. Wrath filled his words as he spoke on, and his husky voice kept rising to a strange, unnatural squeal.

"It tempts you, a tale like that. I felt the same way, too, when I was your age—that maybe I'd turn out to be a swan. Well, and... I was supposed to study at the Academy, but I went to the University instead. My father—he was a priest—disowned me. Then, in Paris, I studied the history of man's misfortunes—the history of progress. Scribbled some myself, too. Yes. Ah, it's all so...."

He started, and sat listening a moment. Then he said:

"Progress—people made it up, to fool themselves! There's no sense in life, no logic. You can't have progress without slavery. So soon as the minority loses its rule over the majority, humanity will come to a standstill. When we try to ease our life, to facilitate our labour, all we do is complicate it, make ourselves more labour. Factories and machinery, to make more and more machinery—how stupid! More and more factory workers in the world, when all the world really needs is the peasant, the planter of grain. Food—that's the only thing man need wrest from Nature by the labour of his hands. The less a man wants, the happier he is; the more desires, the less liberty."

His actual words, perhaps, were not exactly these; but these, precisely, were the staggering ideas he expressed. It was my first encounter with them—and in so glaring, so undisguised a form. Breaking off on an excited squeal, the man turned his eyes anxiously to the open door that led to the other rooms, and listened a moment through the silence. Then he continued, whispering, in what was almost fury:

"Get this into your head—no one needs much. A loaf of bread, and a woman. . . ."

Of woman he spoke in a mysterious undertone, in words I did not know, in verses I had not read; and, suddenly, he seemed to me very like Bashkin, the thief.

"Beatrice, Fiammetta, Laura, Ninon," he whispered—names unknown to me. He spoke of enamoured kings and bards, and intoned French poetry, waving a thin arm, bare to the elbow, to mark the rhythm.

"Love and hunger rule the world," came the fevered whisper. These words I knew. They were printed below the title of the revolutionary pamphlet *King Hunger*—a fact which, in my mind, lent them peculiar weight and significance.

"Men seek forgetfulness, solace—not knowledge!"

This final idea staggered me completely.

It was morning when I left the kitchen: a few minutes past six by the little clock on the wall. Pushing through snowdrifts in the leaden murk, with the wail of the storm around me, and the squealing fury of this broken man still ringing in my ears, I felt that these things he had said were a dose I could not swallow. They were stuck in my throat, somewhere—suffocating me. I did not want to go home to the bakery, to be among people. And, dragging on my shoulders a growing burden of clinging flakes, I wandered through the streets of the Tatar quarter until daylight came, and the figures of townspeople began to bob through the drifted snow.

I never again met this history teacher, nor did I wish to meet him. But in future I was repeatedly to hear such talk of the idiocy of life, the futility of labour—to hear it from the lips of illiterate wanderers and homeless tramps, of "Tolstoians," of highly cultured men and women. I have heard such talk from a hieromonach who held the degree of Master of Divinity; from a chemist working on explosives; from a biologist of the neovitalist trend, and many others. But the effect of these ideas, in such later encounters, could not be so dizzying as in this, my first acquaintance with them.

And only a year or two ago—more than thirty years after my talk with the history teacher—I most unexpectedly heard these same ideas, in almost the very same words, from an old acquaintance of mine, a worker.

We got to talking very candidly; and this man—a "political big bug," as he termed himself, smiling rather grimly—told me, with that reckless frankness of which, I believe, only Russians are capable:

"Alexei Maximich, dear friend! What do I want with all this business—science, academies, aeroplanes? Just another burden! I've no use for it. All I want is a peaceful corner, and—a woman, for me to kiss when I feel like it; and for her to meet my kisses honestly—body and soul. There! You—you reason like an intellectual. You're not one of us any more. You've been poisoned. Ideas mean more to you than a little thing like people. You think like the sheenies—that man was made for the Sabbath. Isn't that so?"

"The Jews don't think any such thing."

"The devil knows what they think. They're a hard folk to understand," he replied. Flinging his cigarette out over the river, he silently watched its fall.

It was a moonlit autumn night. We sat together on a granite bench on the Neva embankment, both of us worn out by a day of fruitless emotional strain, of persistent but unavailing desire to get some aim accomplished: a good and useful aim.

"You're with us, but you're not one of us—that's what I say," he continued quietly, thoughtfully. "Intellectuals—they like to worry. All down the centuries, they've attached themselves to rebellions. Like Christ. He was an idealist, and rebelled for the sake of the other world. And just the same way, the whole intellectual order rebels for the sake of utopia. An idealist rebels, and the ne'er-do-wells, the scoundrels, the scum go along with him—all out of spite, because they see life has no room for them. The workers—they rebel for the revolution. What they need is, to get a proper distribution of the means and products of labour. When they've got all the power secure—do you think they'll agree to have a state? Not they! They'll all break up and scatter, and every one of them will try to find himself a peaceful corner somewhere, on his own. . . .

"Machines, you say? Technology? But that can only tighten the noose around our necks. It can only strengthen our bonds. No. We've got to rid ourselves of needless labour. What a man wants is quiet. Factories, and sciences—they won't give us quiet. It's not much a person needs, alone by himself. Why should I pile up cities, when all I need is a little bit of a house? When people live in bunches, you find them getting things like running water, and plumbing, and electricity. But—if you'd just try to get along without all that, how easy life would be! Say what you please, but we've a lot of needless things; and they all come from the intellectuals. And that's why I say, intellectuals—they're a pernicious category."

I remarked that no people on earth knew how to divest life of meaning so thoroughly, and so unhesitatingly, as did we Russians.

"The freest in spirit of all the peoples," my friend rejoined, with a little laugh. "Only—don't you be angry, but I'm reasoning right. That's the way millions of us think, only they don't know how to put it into words.... Life should be made more simple. Then it would treat us more kindly."

This man had never been a "Tolstoian"; nor had he ever evinced anarchist tendencies. I was well acquainted with the course of his intellectual development.

After this conversation with him, I could not help wondering: suppose it were really true that millions of Russian men and women were bearing the pain and stress of revolution only because, in their heart of hearts, they cherished the hope of ridding themselves of labour? A minimum of toil and a maximum of pleasure: that is a very tempting notion. It carries people away, like everything unrealizable, like every utopia.

And I recalled Henrik Ibsen's lines:

"Conservative," you say I have become.
I am what I have been all through my life.
I never was a man for shifting pawns.
End the whole game!—and I am wholly yours.
The only revolution I recall
That was not altogether a cheat and fraud,
One that out-gloried all of its successors—
That, of course, was the great Deluge.
But Lucifer was cheated even then,
For Noah, on the Ark, became dictator.
So—let us try again, friends radicals.
And to do that, let us have fighters, orators.
Yes, bring about another world-wide Deluge;
And I—I'll gladly torpedo the Ark.

The income brought in by Derenkov's shop was miserably small; and the number of people and undertakings in need of financial aid grew steadily.

"We'll have to think of something," Andrei would say, absently fingering his beard; and he would smile his apologetic smile, or, perhaps, sigh wistfully.

This man, it seemed to me, regarded himself as one condemned for life to heavy labour for humanity; and, though he had reconciled himself to this sentence, there were times when it weighed heavily on him.

More than once, in various phrasing, I asked him:

"Why do you do it?"

He evidently failed to grasp my meaning; for he always answered, instead, to the question, "what for?"—answered bookishly, incoherently, speaking of the people's wretched life, of the need for enlightenment and knowledge.

"But—do people want knowledge? Is it knowledge they seek?"

"Of course! How else? You want it, don't you?"

Yes. I wanted it. But I recalled what the history teacher had said:

"Men seek forgetfulness, solace—not knowledge!"

It is harmful, for ideas so incisive, to come up against young persons of seventeen. The ideas are blunted by such encounters; nor do the young people gain by them.

I began to imagine that I noticed—that I had always noticed—the same thing everywhere: stories, however interesting, were enjoyed only because they afforded people an hour's forgetfulness of their wretched, but accustomed life; the more "invention" a tale contained, the more eagerly it was received; the books found most absorbing were those plentifully supplied with pretty "make-believe." Briefly—I was groping in a noxious fog.

Derenkov decided to start a bakery. It was worked out, I recall, with the utmost precision, that this enterprise should yield no less than thirty-five per cent on every turnover. I was to work as the baker's "boy," and—as "one of the circle"—to take care that the said baker did not pilfer flour, eggs, butter, or finished goods.

And so, I moved from one basement—huge and filthy—to another, small and rather cleaner: keeping it clean being one of my new functions. In place of an artel of forty, I now had to do with only one man. The man had greying temples; a short, pointed beard; a lean, smoke-cured face, with dark and thoughtful eyes; and a peculiar mouth: small as a perch's, with thick, soft lips pursed up as though, in his thoughts, he were kissing someone. And—deep down in his eyes, a glint of mockery.

He did pilfer, of course. The very first night of our work in the bakery, he laid aside ten eggs, three pounds or more of flour, and a good-sized lump of butter.

"What's that for?"

"Oh, that's for a little girl I know," he returned amicably; and, puckering his forehead, added, "A ni-ice little girl!"

I made an attempt to convince him that the world considers thievery a crime. But my powers of eloquence were evidently insufficient; or, perhaps, I was not too firmly convinced myself of the truth I wished to demonstrate. In any case, my words had no effect.

Lying back on the lid of the dough box, staring up through the window at the stars, the baker mumbled incredulously:

"Him—lecturing me! First time he ever saw me, and there you are! Lecturing me! And me three times his age. It's a funny thing."

When he had completed his inspection of the stars, he asked:

"Where'd you work before this? Seems to me I've seen you somewhere. At Semyonov's, you say? Where they had the row? Oh. Well then, it must have been in one of my dreams I saw you."

Within a few days I discovered that this man had an unlimited gift for sleep. He could sleep at any time, and in any position—even standing up, with his weight thrown on the wooden spade that was used for putting the bread into the stove. In sleep, his eyebrows would lift, and his whole face undergo a subtle change, assuming an expression of ironic surprise. His favourite topics of conversation were tales of buried treasure, and of dreams. He declared with conviction:

"I see the earth through and through, and it's all stuffed like a pie with treasures. Pots and chests and bowls of money, buried all over. Time and again, I dream about some place I know. There was a bath-house, once. I dreamed there was a chest of silver plate there, buried in the corner. Well, I woke up, and went straight there, in the night, to dig. Dug down an arshin and a half, maybe, and what do you think I found? Cinders, and a dog's skull. There! I was in the right spot! And all of a sudden—bang! The window went smash, and some fool woman started screaming her head off: 'Thieves! Help!' So, of course, I ran, or I'd have had a beating. It's a funny thing."

I often heard that: "It's a funny thing." But Ivan Kozmich Lutonin did not laugh. He would only pucker his forehead, and dilate his nostrils, screwing his eyes up in a sort of smile.

There was nothing fanciful about his dreams. They were dull and stupid as reality itself. I did not understand how he could take such pleasure in describing them, and at the same time be so unwilling to talk of the life around him.

The daughter of a wealthy tea merchant, married against her will, shot herself immediately after the wedding ceremony. The whole city was aroused. A crowd of young people—several thousand—joined in her funeral procession, and students delivered speeches by her grave. In the end, the police dispersed them. Everyone in our little shop was shouting about this tragedy; and the room behind the shop was crammed with excited students. Indignant voices, trenchant words floated down to us in the basement.

"They should have spanked the girl more, when she was little," Lutonin remarked; and in his next breath informed me:

"I dreamed I was fishing in a pond, for carp. And all of a sudden—a policeman. 'Halt! By what right?' And—no place to run to! So I jumped in the water, and woke up."

And yet, though reality seemed to run its course somewhere beyond the bounds of his attention, it was not long before he began to sense something unusual about our bakery. Customers in the shop were served by girls unsuited to such work—girls who read books. One was the owner's sister, the other—one of her friends, tall and red-cheeked, with kindly eyes. Students came every day, and stayed for hours in the room behind the shop, talking noisily, or whispering together. The owner was seldom in evidence, and I—the "boy"—was more or less in the position of manager.

"Are you any kin to the boss?" Lutonin asked. "Or is he thinking of you, maybe, for a brother-in-law? No? It's a funny thing. And—what do the students hang around here for? On account of the young ladies? Umm.... Well, that might be so. Only—they're nothing much to look at, your young ladies. Those student fellows—I'd say it's to stuff up on rolls they come, more than to please the girls."

At five or six in the morning, almost daily, a girl would appear at the bakery window: a short-legged figure, thrown together of hemispheres of every dimension—very much like a sack of water-melons. Sitting on the edge of our window area, her bare legs dangling, she would call, between yawns:

"Vanya!"

Light, curly hair, straying from under her gay kerchief, fell in tight ringlets over her low forehead, over her ruddy cheeks, puffed out like toy balloons. The curls pushed into her sleepy eyes, and, lazily, she would brush them back with her tiny hands—keeping the fingers comically spread, like a newborn baby. I often wondered: what could a person talk about, with such a girl? When I woke the baker, he would ask her:

"Here, are you?"

"Here I am."

"Sleep well?"

"Why shouldn't I?"

"What did you dream?"

"I don't remember."

The town lies still. True, not entirely: a yardman's broom is scraping away somewhere, and the sparrows, just awakened, have begun to chirp. The gentle, warming rays of the rising sun slant down to meet their reflections in the window-panes. I love these pensive moments, when the day is just beginning. Thrusting a hairy arm out at the open window, the baker paws the girl's legs. She submits to this examination indifferently, unsmilingly, blinking her blank sheep eyes.

"Peshkov, take out the sweet stuff. It's time!"

I draw the iron sheets out of the stove. The baker catches up half a score of buns, rolls, puffs, and throws them into the girl's lap. She casts a hot bun gingerly from hand to hand, then sinks her yellow sheep's teeth into it—

burns her mouth, and moans and grunts impatiently.

Watching her amorously, the baker says:

"Let your skirt down, hussy!"

And when she has gone, he boasts to me:

"Like a spring lamb—all over curls! Did you see? Me, brother—I'm finicky about that sort of thing. I never take a woman. Only girls. This one's my thirteenth. Nikiforich's god-daughter, she is."

Listening silently to these outpourings, I ask myself:

"And I? Am I to live like that?"

As soon as the big white loaves, to be sold by the pound, were ready, I would lay ten or twelve on a long board and hurry off with them to Derenkov's old shop. This errand done, I would stuff a two-pood basket with rolls and buns and set out on the run for the Theological Academy, to be in time for the students' breakfast hour. Standing just inside the doorway of the huge dining hall, supplying the students with rolls—"for cash," or "to be charged"—I would drink in all I could catch of their arguments about Lev Tolstoi. One of the Academy professors, a certain Gusev, was a rabid enemy of Tolstoi and his teachings. Sometimes there would be books in my basket, under the rolls—to be surreptitiously delivered to one or another of the students. Sometimes, too, the students would thrust books or notes into my basket.

Once a week I would carry my rolls still further: to the "Crazy House," where the psychiatrist Bekhterev delivered lectures and demonstrated patients. One day he showed the students a megalomaniac. When this man appeared in the doorway of the lecture hall, a lanky figure, in a white hospital robe and a stocking nightcap, I could not restrain a smile. But—advancing past me into the hall—he paused for an instant, and glanced into my face; and I shrank back. It was as though his piercing gaze, coal black, yet fiery, had struck to my very heart. And all through the lecture, while Bekhterev, twitching at his beard, made respectful conversation with the maniac, I kept furtively rubbing a hand over my face. It felt as though a wave of scalding dust had blown against it.

In a dull, toneless bass, the man kept demanding something of Bekhterev. He stretched out a lanky arm in an imperious gesture, and the sleeve of his robe fell far back from his lanky fingers. His whole figure seemed to me to stretch out unnaturally, to grow and lengthen, until that swarthy arm—I felt—could reach across the room at will, and seize me by the throat. Menace and command gleamed in the penetrating glare of the dark eyes sunk in black pits in his bony face. A score or so of students sat watching this man in the ridiculous nightcap. A few were smiling; but the majority were sober and absorbed. Their eyes seemed uncommonly ordinary, as compared with the blazing light of his. He struck fear to the heart; and there was something of majesty about him—there was indeed!

The professor's voice rang clear and distinct through the heavy silence of the students. His every query evoked stern outcries in that dull voice that seemed to issue from beneath the floor—from behind the dead white walls. The maniac's movements were slow and pompous as an archbishop's.

That night, I scribbled verses about him, terming him "sovereign of all sovereigns, God's friend and counsellor." For a long time he lingered in my thoughts, making life difficult.

Busy from six in the evening almost until noon, I spent my afternoons in sleep, and had no time for reading but the intermissions in our work, when one batch of dough had been kneaded and the next had not yet risen, and the bread had just been put into the stove. As I began to learn the secrets of the trade, the baker did less and less of the work, shifting it all to my shoulders—"to teach me how." In a tone of friendly amazement, he would say:

"You're able. In a year or two, you'll be a full-fledged baker. It's a funny thing. A youngster like you—who's going to respect you, or do your bidding?"

He did not approve of my passion for books.

"Stop your reading, and get some sleep," he would advise me solicitously. But he never asked what was in the books I read.

He himself was entirely absorbed by his dreams, his fancies of buried treasure, and his short-legged, roly-poly girl. The girl not infrequently came at night, and he would take her out to the entry, where the sacks of flour lay; or—if it was cold—would ask me, puckering up his forehead:

"Get out for half an hour!"

And I would get out, reflecting on the monstrous dissimilarity between this love and the love that was described in books....

My employer's sister lived in the little room behind the shop. I heated the samovar for her regularly, but tried to see as little of her as I could. She made me uncomfortable. Her childlike eyes would turn on me in the same unbearable gaze as during my first encounters with her. In their depths, I suspected, a smile lay hidden: a smile that mocked at me.

My great physical strength made me very ungainly. Watching me handle the five-pood sacks of flour, the baker would say commiseratingly:

"You've got strength enough for three, only—clumsy! Just like a bull, for all you're so lanky."

I had done quite some reading by this time. I liked poetry, and had myself begun to scribble verses. In speech, however, rather than book terms, I continued to use "my own" words. These were heavy, I knew, and harsh;

but only they, it seemed to me, could give expression to the utter confusion of my thoughts. At times, again, I was deliberately rude, in protest against a something—I could not say exactly what—that I found alien, exasperating.

One of my teachers, a student of mathematics, reproached me with this:

"The way you talk, the devil take it all! Not words, but iron weights!"

Altogether, as often happens with adolescents, I was dissatisfied with myself, thought myself ridiculous and coarse. There was my face, too—high cheekbones, like a Kalmyk's; and my voice, which I could not control.

My employer's sister, on the contrary, was swift and graceful as a swallow on the wing; but the lightness of her movements seemed to me out of keeping with her plump, rounded little figure. In her gestures, in her gait, there was something not quite genuine, something of conscious effort. Her voice was cheerful, and she often laughed; but, hearing her clear laughter, I would think that she was simply trying to make me forget the condition in which I had first seen her. And I did not want to forget it. I treasured every impression of things ranging beyond the ordinary. I had an urgent need to know that the extraordinary was possible, that it actually existed.

Sometimes she asked:

"What are you reading?"

I would answer briefly—feeling the impulse to ask, in turn:

"What does my reading matter to you?"

One night the baker, fondling his sweetheart, said to me half-tipsily:

"Get out for a while. Ah, why don't you go play with the boss's sister? Letting a chance like that go by! Why, the students. . . ."

I told him I would crack his head for him with an iron weight if he ever said anything of the kind again. Settling down on the flour sacks in the entry, I heard his voice, through the ill-hung door:

"Why should I be angry? That's what comes of lapping up books all day—the fellow goes around like a man crazed."

Rats rustled and squeaked in the entry. In the bakery, the girl grunted and moaned. I went out into the yard. A fine rain was drifting lazily, almost soundlessly down; but it did not freshen the close air, heavy with the smell of burning. Forests were afire somewhere. It was long past midnight. Windows were open in the house opposite the bakery, and a song floated from the half-lit rooms:

St. Varlami of old,
In his halo of gold,
Smiles adown at his fold,
Very pleased with them.

I tried to imagine Maria Derenkova lying on my knees, as the baker's girl lay on his—and felt in every fibre that this was impossible. The very thought was frightening.

From sundown to sunrise
Song and cup the Saint plies,
And in—hm!—other wise
Does disport himself.

Through the other voices sounded a deep, rich bass, lingering on the mischievous "hm!" I bent forward, bracing my hands on my knees, to look in at a window. Through the lacy curtain I saw the grey walls of a square pit, lit by a small, blue-shaded lamp. Before the lamp, her face to the window, a girl sat writing. Now she raised her head, and with the top of her red pen pushed a lock of hair back from her temple. Her eyes were half-closed, her face bright with a smile. Unhurriedly, she folded her letter, licked the edge of the envelope flap, and sealed it. Then, flinging it down on the table, she shook a threatening finger at it—her forefinger, smaller than my pinkie. But—again she took up the missive, frowning; tore open the envelope, and read the letter through, sealed it again in another envelope, and, bending over the table, wrote the address. Then she waved the letter in the air to dry, like a white flag of truce. Twirling on her toes, clapping her hands, she danced out of my view, towards the bed in the corner of the room. When she came back into sight, she had removed her blouse. Her shoulders were very plump and round. She took the lamp from the table, and disappeared again into the corner. A person's actions, when he thinks himself alone, may often seem insane to a chance observer. Pacing up and down the yard, I wondered about the strange life this girl led when she was alone in her little den.

But when the sandy-haired student came to visit her, and sat talking of something, very low, almost in a whisper—she would shrink into herself, seeming smaller even than usual. She would turn her eyes timidly to him, and hide her hands behind her back or under the table. I disliked him, that sandy-haired student. Disliked him strongly. . . .

The baker's girl came stumbling by, huddled in her shawl, and grunted at me:

"Go inside."

Throwing the dough out on the board, the baker boasted to me of his sweetheart, of her indefatigable powers of solace. But I stood wondering:

"Where am I heading to?"

And I felt that, somewhere very near—around some corner—misfortune lay in wait for me.

The bakery was doing so well that Derenkov had begun to look around for larger premises. He had decided, too, to take on another hand. That was a good thing. I was carrying too great a load, and it tired me to stupefaction.

"You'll be the senior hand in the new

place," the baker promised me. "I'll tell them to raise you to ten rubles a month. That's right."

I knew well enough why he wanted to have me as the senior hand. He hated work; and I worked willingly. Fatigue was good for me. It dulled my mental uneasiness, and restrained the insistent demands of sex. But—it made reading impossible.

"It's a good thing you've dropped those books of yours," the baker said. "Rat food, that's all they're good for! Only—don't you ever really have any dreams? Of course you do! You're just close-mouthed. A funny thing. Why, there's no harm in telling dreams. It can't hurt anyone."

He was always very friendly, and seemed even to feel a real respect for me. Or, perhaps, it was fear, because I seemed a protégé of our employer's—though this did not deter him from systematic pilfering.

My grandmother died. It was seven weeks after her burial before I received the letter, from one of my cousins, that informed me of her death. This brief note—innocent of commas—related that Granny had fallen from the church porch, while begging alms, and broken her leg. Eight days after, she had "got the gangrene." I later learned that my three cousins, all young and robust, and the children one of them had brought into the world, had been living on Granny, subsisting on the alms she gathered. They lacked the intelligence to call a doctor.

My cousin wrote:

"We buried her in the Petropavlovsk churchyard where all our folks lie we came to the funeral and the beggars were there too they all loved her and they cried. Grandfather cried too he chased us away and stayed there by her grave alone we watched him through the bushes he was crying he'll die soon too."

I did not cry. But—I recall—it was as though an icy wind swept over me. Sitting on the woodpile in the yard, that night, I felt a great longing to talk to somebody of Granny; to tell them how kind she was, and wise, and a mother to all. For a long time I carried this heavy longing in my heart; but there was no one I could talk to of such things, and it finally burned itself out, unsatisfied.

These days came back to mind when, many years later, I read A. P. Chekhov's splendidly true tale of the cabman who talked to his horse of his son's death. And I regretted that, in those days of bitter grief, I had not had a horse to talk to, or a dog. I regretted that it had not occurred to me to confide my sorrow to the rats. There were many of these in the bakery, and I was on the best of terms with them.

Policeman Nikiforich began hovering around me like a hungry bird of prey. He was a sturdy, well-built old man, with close-cropped silvery hair and a broad beard that was always neatly trimmed and combed. He eyed me much as one might a goose fattened for Christmas.

"You're fond of reading, I've heard say," he would begin. "Well, now, and what sort of books is it you take to? The Bible, maybe, or the Lives of the Saints?"

Yes. I knew the Bible, and the Daily Lessons, too. Nikiforich seemed surprised at this, and somewhat disconcerted.

"Mmm. Well, wholesome reading's lawful enough. And what about Count Tolstoi—ever read his writings?"

I had read Tolstoi as well; but—it appeared —not those of his works which interested the policeman.

"That's all—well, ordinary stuff, the same as everybody writes. But there's other stuff of his, people are talking about, where he comes out against the priests. That would be worth reading!"

I had read the "other stuff" too, in hectographed copies; but I had found it rather dull, and I knew that it was not a matter for discussion with the police.

After a few such brief talks in the street, the old man began inviting me to visit him.

"Come around to my box, and we'll have some tea."

I understood, of course, what he was after; and yet—I wanted to go. I took counsel with my mentors, and it was decided that evasion of the policeman's hospitality might only serve to intensify his suspicions against the bakery.

And so—a visit to Nikiforich's box. A third of the low little room is occupied by the Russian stove; another third, by a big double bed, behind looped cotton curtains, piled with a multitude of pillows in bright red covers. In the remaining space: a cupboard, a table, two chairs, and, by the one tiny window, a wooden bench. Nikiforich, his uniform jacket thrown open, occupies the bench; and his back blocks the entire window. I sit facing him across the table, beside his wife—a full-bosomed, ruddy-cheeked young woman of about twenty, with mischievous and spiteful eyes of a strange, slate-grey colour. She keeps pursing her vivid lips capriciously, and a dry hint of malice sounds in her voice.

"It's come to my knowledge," the policeman says, "that my god-daughter Sekleteya hangs around your bakery. A loose wench, and vicious. And all women are vicious."

"All of them?" his wife demands.

"Every single one!" Nikiforich returns emphatically, rattling his medals as a restive horse rattles its harness. He gulps some tea from his saucer, and repeats with relish:

"Vicious and loose, from the last streetwalking— and up to the very queens! The Queen of Sheba travelled two thousand versts across the desert to King Solomon, just for depravity. And our Tsaritsa Ekaterina, too, they may call her 'the Great,' but. . . ."

And he relates, in great detail, the story of some palace menial who in one night spent with the tsaritsa rose through every rank in the army, from sergeant to general. His wife, listening attentively, licks her lips now and again, and thrusts her leg against mine under the table. Nikiforich talks very smoothly, savourily. By some imperceptible transition, he veers to an entirely new topic:

"Now, for instance, there's a student on our street. University, first year. His name's Pletnyov. . . ."

His wife puts in, sighing wistfully:

"Not good-looking, but—nice!"

"Who's nice?"

"Mr. Pletnyov."

"In the first place, drop the 'mister.' He'll be 'mister' when he's got his learning, and in the meantime he's just a student, like any other student. Thousands of 'em. And in the second place, what do you mean—nice?"

"He's so jolly. And young."

"In the first place, a clown in a showbooth is jolly too."

"Clowns—they're paid to be jolly.'

"Shut up! And in the second place, even a dog starts out as a pup."

"Clowns—they're just monkeys."

"Shut up, I said, in case you don't remember. Do you hear?"

"I hear you."

"Well, then. . . ."

And, his wife subdued, Nikiforich turns back to me.

"This Pletnyov—as I was saying, he's an interesting fellow. You ought to get acquainted with him."

As Nikiforich has probably often seen Pletnyov and me together, I reply:

"I am."

"You are, eh? Hmm. . . ."

There is disappointment in his tone. He shifts suddenly on his bench, so that his medals rattle. I am very much on my guard. I happen to know of certain leaflets that Pletnyov runs off on the hectograph.

The woman, thrusting her leg against mine, teases the old man on; and he puffs himself up importantly, spreading his store of words before me as a peacock spreads its iridescent tail. But his wife's pranks under the table keep me from listening properly, and again I miss the moment of transition, when his voice drops to a lower and more weighty tone.

"An invisible thread—you understand?" he says, and stares into my face with wide, round eyes—as though in sudden fear.

"If you take His Majesty, the Emperor, as a spider...."

"Oh! What are you saying?" the woman cries.

"You—hold your tongue! Silly fool! It's put that way for clearness, not for aspersion, slut! Clear away the samovar."

Knitting his brows and narrowing his eyes, he continues impressively:

"An invisible thread—like a cobweb, you might say. It comes from the heart of His Imperial Majesty, Tsar Alexander the Third, Emperor of All the Russias and etc. and etc., and it comes on down through His Majesty's ministers, and through His Excellency, the governor, and down through all the ranks, right down to me, and even the least soldier in the army. And it reaches out to everything, that thread; it twists and twines around everything. And by its invisible might the tsar's realm is preserved through all the centuries. Only—that sly English queen, she's bribed the Polacks, and the sheenies, and some Russians, too, and they just do their best to tear the thread wherever they can, pretending as if they're for the people!"

He leans across the table towards me, demanding in a stern whisper:

"Understand? Well, then! Why do you think I talk this way to you? Your baker praises you—a clever lad, he says, and honest, and lives all by himself. Well, and there's all these students hanging around your bakery. They're in Derenkova's room to all hours of the night. If it was one—that's simple. But—there's so many. What does that mean? Eh? I'm not saying anything against students. A student today—assistant prosecutor tomorrow. Students—they're all right. Only they're in too much of a hurry to take their part in life, and the tsar's enemies—they set them on! See? And another thing I'll tell you. . . ."

But before he could tell me, the door was flung open. An old man came in: a tiny, rednosed fellow, with a crop of curly hair held back from his forehead by a leather strap. He had a bottle of vodka in his hand, and—evidently—some vodka inside him as well.

"A game of checkers?" he inquired jauntily—and immediately blazed out in a fireworks of facetious sayings.

"My father-in-law," Nikiforich said glumly, evidently annoyed.

I soon took my leave. The impish woman, seeing me out, gave me a pinch, and said:

"Look at the clouds! As red as fire!"

The sky was clear, except for one gold-tinted cloudlet.

With no desire to slight my teachers, I must say that the policeman gave me a bolder and more graphic explanation than they of the structure of the state machine. Somewhere, a spider lurked; and from this spider—trammelling, entangling every aspect of life—there issued an "invisible thread." Soon, wherever I turned, I began to distinguish its tenacious loops and twists.

Late that evening, when the shop was shut, Maria Derenkova called me into her room and informed me briskly that she had been commissioned to ask what the policeman had talked to me about.

"Good Lord!" she exclaimed, when I had made a full report; and, much like a trapped mouse, she began scurrying up and down the room, shaking her head in dismay. "But—does the baker ever try to draw you out? His mistress—she's some relative of Nikiforich's, isn't she? We'll have to get rid of him."

Standing in the doorway, I watched her sullenly. She used the word "mistress" so matter-of-factly, somehow. I did not like it. Nor did I like her decision to get rid of the baker.

"See that you're very careful," she said; and, as always, I was uncomfortable under her persistent stare. It seemed to be inquiring something of me—but what, I could not understand. Now she stopped in front of me, her hands behind her back.

"Why are you always so glum?"

"My grandmother died not long ago."

This seemed to amuse her. Smiling, she asked:

"Were you very fond of her?"

"Yes. Is there anything else you want?"

"No."

I left; and, as I recall, the verses I wrote that night contained the obstinate line:

You are not what you wish to seem.

It was decided that the students keep away from the bakery, so far as possible. Seeing them but rarely, I now had almost no opportunity for inquiring about things that were unclear to me in the books I read. I took to writing down my questions in a notebook. But one day, when I was very tired, I fell asleep over my notes, and the baker read them. Waking me up, he demanded:

"What's this stuff you're always scribbling? 'Why didn't Garibaldi drive out the king?' Who's Garibaldi? And who ever heard of a thing like that—driving out kings?"

Angrily, he flung the notebook down on the dough box and turned away. From the stove, he grumbled at me:

"Kings, he's got to drive out, if you please! A funny thing. You drop that sort of tricks. Books on the brain! Out in Saratov, four-five years ago, the gendarmes were pulling in book-worms like you right and left. Nikiforich has his eye on you as it is. Forget about your kings. They're no pigeons, for you to chase."

He spoke in good will. But I could not answer him as I would have liked to. I had been forbidden to talk to the baker on "dangerous topics."

There was an exciting book of some kind passing from hand to hand about the city. People everywhere were reading it, and quarrelling over it. I asked Lavrov, the veterinary, to get me a copy; but he said hopelessly:

"Oh, no, my friend. That's out of the question. Though, come to think of it, I believe there's to be a reading, one of these days, in a place I know. Perhaps I'll be able to take you there."

Midnight of Assumption Day found me striding through the darkness across the Arskoye Polye, following Lavrov's dim figure—fifty sazhens or so ahead. The field was entirely deserted. Still, as Lavrov had advised, I kept up certain "precautions": whistling, singing, staggering now and again, in the role of a tipsy workman. Ragged black clouds drifted sluggishly overhead, and the moon rolled, a golden ball, among them, sending heavy shadows slanting across the field and rousing a gleam of silver and steel in every puddle. Behind me rose the angry drone of the city.

My guide paused at an orchard fence, somewhere beyond the Theological Academy, and I hurried up to join him. Silently, we climbed the fence and advanced through the weed-grown, neglected orchard, brushing against low-hung branches that spattered us with heavy drops of dew. We reached a house, and tapped lightly at a closely shuttered window. The shutter swung open. A bearded face looked out. Behind it—darkness, and not a sound.

"Who's there?"

"Friends of Yakov's."

"Climb in."

Through the impenetrable darkness I sensed the presence of other people. There was a rustle of clothing, a shuffling of feet. I heard a low cough, then whispered conversation. A match flared, lighting my face, and I glimpsed dark figures around the walls.

"Everyone here?"

"Yes."

"Hang something on the windows, so the light won't show through the shutters."

A sonorous voice demanded angrily:

"Whose bright idea was it to get together in a deserted house?"

"Not so loud!"

Off in a corner, someone lit a tiny lamp. The room was empty, unfurnished. On a board laid across two boxes, five people sat in a row, like jackdaws on a fence. Another box, turned end up, supported the lamp. Three more people sat on the floor by the wall; and on the window-sill perched a long-haired youth, very thin and pale. Except for this youth and the bearded man, I knew everyone present. The bearded man announced, in a deep bass, that he would read to us a pamphlet entitled *Our Differences,* by Georgi Plekhanov, "a former adherent of Narodnaya Volya."

Someone grunted, from the shadows by the wall:

"We know all that!"

I felt a pleasant excitement, engendered by the atmosphere of mystery—that most enthralling of all poetry. I felt like a true believer at early services in the temple of his faith; I recalled the catacombs, and the early Christians. The deep, rumbling voice rolled on, clearly enunciating every word, filling the entire room.

Again someone grunted from a corner:

"Fiddlesticks!"

Above the figures in that corner, copper gleamed dully, mysteriously through the darkness. It made me think of a Roman warrior's helmet. After a while I realized that it must be the handle of the stove damper.

Low voices sounded in the room, grappling in a turbid chaos of heated speech until it was impossible to distinguish one speaker's words from another's. Then, from the window-sill—just above my head—someone demanded loudly, ironically:

"Are we going to read that pamphlet, or aren't we?"

This was the pale, long-haired youth. The voices died away, and again the only sound was the deep bass of the reader. Burning cigarettes glowed redly; and now and again a match would flare, lighting up thoughtful faces, with eyes narrowed meditatively, or wide and staring.

The reading continued so long that I grew tired of listening, although I liked the keen, provoking words, simply and easily strung into convincing thoughts.

Then—suddenly, unexpectedly—the reader stopped. At once the room rang to indignant exclamations:

"Renegade!"

"Empty noise!"

"Defiling the blood shed by our heroes!"

"After the executions—Generalov, Ulyanov. . . ."

And again, from the window-sill, the youth demanded:

"Gentlemen! Suppose we dropped cursing, and got down to serious discussion?"

I did not like arguments, could not learn to follow them. It was hard for me to keep up with the wayward leaps of excited thought; and I was always irritated by the denuded vanity of the debaters.

Bending forward, the youth on the window-sill said to me:

"You're Peshkov, aren't you? From the bakery? I'm Fedoseyev. We two ought to get acquainted. Look—there's really nothing here for us. This noise will keep on for hours, and there's very little use in it. Shall we get out?"

I had already heard of Fedoseyev, and of the circle he had organized—a very serious-minded group of young people; and I was attracted by his deep eyes, by his pale, nervous face.

As we walked across the field together, he asked about my life: whether I had acquaintances among working people; what books I had read; how much free time I had. Among other things, he said:

"I've heard about this bakery of yours. It's strange to me that you should spend your time on foolishness. What do you see in it?"

For some time past, I had myself begun to feel that I had no use for it. I told him so, and he seemed very pleased. In parting, he shook my hand heartily, with a pleasant, sunny smile. He was leaving town in a day or two, he said, for about three weeks. When he got back, he would let me know where we could meet, and how.

Affairs at the bakery were going very well indeed; but life for me was growing worse with every day. We moved into new premises, and my round of duties became greater still. Besides my work in the bakery, I had to deliver rolls and buns at private homes, and to sell them at the Academy and at the school for "well-born young ladies." Picking buns from my basket, these young ladies would slip letters in; and not infrequently, to my astonishment, I would find utterly shameless words scrawled, in still childish hand, on the dainty note paper. It made me feel very queer, to watch this bevy of clear-eyed, immaculate young girls crowd around my basket—gaily chattering, grimacing, turning over the buns with their little pink paws; to watch them, and wonder which of them it was that wrote me such brazen notes—such ugly, forbidden words, the true meaning of which, perhaps, they did not understand. And, recalling the filthy "houses of solace," I would ask myself:

"Can it be that from those dens the 'invisible thread' reaches even to a place like this?"

One of the young ladies, a full-bosomed brunette with a thick black braid down her back, stopped me in the hall one day and whispered hastily:

"I'll give you ten kopeks if you'll deliver this note for me."

Her soft, dark eyes filled with tears. She bit her lip, and her face and ears reddened painfully. I chivalrously refused the ten kopeks, but took the note and delivered it as addressed: to a lanky student, with a consumptive flush on his cheeks—the son of one of the judges of the superior court. He offered me fifty kopeks, counting it out in abstracted silence, in small copper change. When I said I did not want the money, he made to thrust it back into his pocket; but his hand was so unsteady that the coins fell clattering to the floor.

Vacantly, he watched them roll across the room. He rubbed his hands together until the knuckles cracked, and muttered, with a heavy sigh:

"What's to be done now? Well, good-bye, then. I must think. . . ."

What his thinking led to, I do not know; but I was very sorry for the young lady. She soon disappeared. When I met her again, some fifteen years later, she was teaching school in the Crimea. Ill with tuberculosis, she spoke of everything in the world with the ruthless malice of one whom life has deeply injured.

My delivery duties done, I would get a little sleep. Then, in the evening, I would work in the bakery, to have the sweet stuff ready for the shop at midnight; for we were now situated near the city theatre, and people would drop in after the play to munch hot buns. That over, I would knead the dough for the morning's bread and rolls; and it is no child's play to knead fifteen or twenty poods by hand.

After this, I could sleep again—for two or three hours; and then I would set out to deliver the new day's wares.

And so it went, day after day.

And all this time I was possessed by an unconquerable urge to sow the seeds of what I considered "wise, right, eternal." I was sociable by nature, and a lively narrator; and my imagination had been stimulated both by personal experience and by books. Out of the slightest, most commonplace fact I could develop an interesting tale, built up around strange twists and turnings of the "invisible thread." I had acquaintances among the workers of the Krestovnikov factory and the Alafuzov mills, and in particular was very much attached to an old weaver, Nikita Rubtsov—

a clever, restless soul, who had worked, at one time or another, in almost every textile mill in Russia.

"Fifty and seven years I've been walking this earth, Alexei of mine, Maximich—my young teasel, my brand-new shuttle," he would say in his smothered voice, with a smile in the grey eyes—always sore—behind his dark spectacles. Held together clumsily by copper wire, these spectacles left green patches of verdigris on the bridge of his nose and behind his ears. Among his fellow weavers Rubtsov was called "the German," because he shaved his whiskers, leaving only a thick tuft of grey bristle under his lower lip and a stiff moustache. He was a broad-chested man, of medium height, emanating a sombre cheerfulness.

"I like the circus," he would say, tilting his bald, bumpy skull until it lay on his left shoulder. "How they train those horses, eh? Beasts, after all. It's comforting. Just beasts—and I have to respect 'em! And I think to myself: well, then, there must be ways of teaching humans, too, to use their brains. The beasts—the circus folk win them with sugar.

For us—we can buy our own sugar, of course, at the grocer's. What we need is a different kind of sugar—for the soul. And the name of that sugar is—kindness. And so I say, youngster: the way to go about things is by kindness, and not by the club, the way it's done in this world of ours. Isn't that right?"

Himself, he did not go about things kindly. He had a mocking, half-contemptuous way of speaking to people; and in argument would fling out brief, grunted retorts, patently designed to insult. When I first met him, in a beer room, the company, provoked to violence, was about to thrash him. One or two blows had already been struck. I intervened, and pulled him out of the place.

"Did they hurt you badly?" I asked, as we walked away in the darkness, through the drizzling autumn rain.

"Hurt me? They don't know how!" he returned indifferently.

Such was the beginning of our acquaintanceship. At first he made fun of me, with great wit and skill; but when I described to him the part played in our lives by the "invisible thread," he exclaimed thoughtfully:

"Why, you're no fool. Not you! The way you put it!"

And his attitude changed to one of fatherly affection. He even began to call me by my full name and patronymic.

"Your ideas—they're right ideas, Alexei of mine, Maximich, my fine tall awl. They're right ideas, only nobody's going to believe you. It don't pay."

"You believe me, don't you?"

"Me—I'm a stray cur. And bobtailed, too. But most people—they're house dogs, with their tails stuck full of burrs: wives, children, knick-knacks, rattletraps. And every dog of 'em worships his kennel. They won't believe you. We had a business once. At the Morozov mill, it was. The ones that pushed ahead, got it on the head. Well, and your head—it's not your bottom. The hurt's not soon forgotten."

He talked somewhat differently after he got to know Yakov Shaposhnikov, a fitter at the Krestovnikov factory. Consumptive Yakov, guitarist and Bible expert, amazed Rubtsov by his impassioned negation of God. Spitting out bloody scraps of dead lung tissue, Yakov argued eagerly, fervently:

"In the first place: I'm not created 'in God's image and after his likeness.' Nothing of the kind. Wisdom? I don't know a thing. Power? I can't do a thing. Goodness? I'm not good, either. No, I'm not! In the second place: either God don't know how hard life's treating me; or he knows, and can't do anything to help me; or he could do something to help, and just don't want to. In the third place: God's not all-wise, he's not all-powerful, he's not merciful. He simply don't exist. It's made up, it's all made up, our whole life all made up, but—they can't fool me!"

Rubtsov was too taken aback to speak, at first. Then, pale with anger, he began cursing furiously. But Yakov quoted the Bible; and the solemn words disarmed Rubtsov, compelled him to a hunched and thoughtful silence.

During these tirades, Shaposhnikov became almost a terrifying figure. His fine features were swarthy, his hair black and curly as a gypsy's; and his blue lips writhed back over gleaming, wolfish teeth. His dark eyes would bore into the eyes of his opponent in a heavy, crushing stare, all but unendurable—a stare that reminded me of the eyes of the megalomaniac.

Coming away from Yakov's, Rubtsov said sombrely:

"No one ever talked against God to me before. Many a thing, I've heard; but never anything like that. He won't live long, of course. And that's a shame! He's worked himself up till he's just white hot.... It's interesting, brother. Yes, it's interesting."

He quickly grew attached to Yakov. The consumptive fitter's talk aroused him to a new excitement, bubbling up from within, that kept him constantly lifting a hand to rub his inflamed eyes.

"So-o-o," he would say, grinning. "So it's out with God, eh? Hmm. If you take the tsar, now, my bright needle, I've my own say about that: the tsar don't bother me. It's not in the tsars the trouble lies; it's in the bosses. I can get on with any tsar you please—Ivan Grozny, for all I care. Sit on your throne, tsar, and rule, if it makes you happy. Only: let me have my way with the boss. That's what! If you do, why I'll chain you to that throne with chains of gold. I'll worship you."

After reading *King Hunger,* he declared: "That's all so, of course."

On first seeing a lithographed pamphlet, he asked, "Who wrote it for you? It's so nice and clear. Give them my thanks."

Rubtsov had an insatiable thirst for knowledge. He would follow the thread of Shaposhnikov's staggering blasphemies with eager, strained attention; and he could sit for hours listening to my talk of books. Delighted, he would throw back his head in joyous laughter, and exclaim:

"A clever thing, the human mind! A clever thing!"

His sore eyes made reading difficult for him; but there were many things he knew, and, not infrequently, he surprised me by unexpected bits of information.

"There's a carpenter, among the Germans, with the most extraordinary mind. The very king calls him in, to ask his advice."

After some questioning, I found it was Bebel he had in mind.

"How do you come to know about him?"

"I know," he returned laconically, scratching his bumpy skull.

Shaposhnikov took no interest in life's laborious bustle and confusion. He was entirely absorbed in doing away with God, and in deriding the clergy. Above all others, he hated monks.

One day, Rubtsov asked amicably:

"Why is it, Yakov, you do all your yelling against God, and nothing else?"

At this he cried, more bitterly than ever:

"Well, and what else stands in my way? What else? Twenty years, almost, I put my faith in him, lived in fear of him—endured, because to question is forbidden: everything is ordained, from on high. I lived my life in fetters. And then I read the Bible carefully —and I saw it was all made up! Made up, Nikita!"

Swinging his arm, as though to rend the "invisible thread," he continued, almost in tears:

"And here I'm dying before my time, all on account of that!"

I had several other acquaintances as well, all interesting. Not infrequently, too, I would drop in to see my old comrades at Semyonov's bakery. They were always glad to see me, and interested in what I had to say. But —Rubtsov lived in the Admiralty district, and Shaposhnikov in the Tatar quarter, way out beyond the Kaban, so that it was a five-verst trudge from one to the other; and I was seldom able to see them. For them to visit me was out of the question. I had no place to receive them; and besides, the new baker—a discharged soldier—was friendly with the gendarmes. Our yard bordered on the back-yard of the gendarmerie headquarters, and portly "blue-coats" would climb the fence to get fresh rolls for Colonel Gangardt, and black bread for themselves. Moreover, I had been instructed not to "push into the limelight," to avoid attracting unwanted attention to our bakery.

My work, I could see, was losing all point. Careless of practical considerations, people took money more and more freely from the cash drawer—so freely that, at times, there was nothing left to pay the flour bills. Derenkov would declare with a wry smile, tugging at his beard:

"We'll go bankrupt."

He, too, was finding life difficult. Fierycurled Nastya, heavy with child, hissed at him like an angry cat. Her green eyes glared accusingly at all the world.

She would walk straight at Andrei, as though she did not see him. Grinning guiltily, he would move out of her way, and then look after her and sigh.

Sometimes he complained to me:

"The whole thing—it's so childish. Everyone just grabs whatever comes to hand. What's the sense of it? I bought myself some socks, a half a dozen pair—and they disappeared the same day."

That was comical—the story of the socks. But I did not laugh. I saw how this unselfish, unassuming man was struggling to keep up his useful undertaking; and I saw how carelessly the people around him treated this undertaking, how thoughtlessly they were demolishing it. Derenkov expected no gratitude from those whom he was serving. But he did have the right to a more friendly, more considerate attitude than was shown to him. His family was rapidly falling to pieces. The father had declined into a quiet melancholia centring around religious fears; the younger brother had taken to drink and women; the sister was like a stranger. She seemed to be having an unhappy love affair with the sandy-haired student. I often noticed that her eyes were swollen with weeping—and I began to hate that student.

I thought I was in love with Maria Derenkova. I was in love, too, with Nadezhda Shcherbatova, who helped out in our shop: a plump, red-cheeked girl, with vivid lips curved always in a kindly smile. Generally, I was in a state of enamourment. My age, my character, my muddled life created the need for woman's company—a need rather belated than premature. I needed feminine tenderness, or, at the least, a woman's friendly interest —needed someone I could talk to about myself, without reserve; someone to help me put in order the tangle of disconnected thoughts, the chaos of varied impressions, that filled my mind.

I had no close friends. The people who regarded me as "raw material to be cultivated" —I was not drawn to them; nor did they encourage confidences. When I tried to talk to them of anything but the specific topics that held their interest, they would advise me briefly:

"Let that alone!"

Guri Pletnyov was arrested, and shipped to the Kresty prison, in St. Petersburg. It was Nikiforich, encountering me in the street in the early morning, who told me this news. Pacing slowly down the sidewalk towards me, with all his medals on—as though returning from parade—the policeman seemed absorbed in thought. He raised a hand to his cap as we came abreast, and passed by without a word; but then stopped short behind me and said gruffly:

"Guri Alexandrovich was arrested last night."

He glanced up and down the street, and added in a lower tone, with a hopeless wave of the hand, "He's ruined now, poor lad!"

What seemed a tear glittered in a corner of his crafty eye.

Pletnyov had been expecting arrest, I knew. He had warned me of it, advising me to keep away from him; and had asked me to pass the warning on to Rubtsov, to whom, like myself, he was warmly attached.

Nikiforich, his eyes on the ground, asked dully:

"Why don't you ever come around?"

I went to his box that evening. Only just awake, he was sitting on his bed, drinking kvass, while his wife, hunched at the window, mended his trousers.

"Yes, that's how it is," he said, scratching his chest through its thick growth of wool; and glanced at me speculatively across the room. "They took him. Found a pan he made ink in, to print leaflets against the Emperor."

He spat on the floor, and grunted at his wife:

"Hand over those pants!"

"In a minute," she replied, without raising her head.

"She's sorry for him," the old man explained to me, indicating the woman with his eyes. "Cried all day. Well, I'm sorry too. Only—what can a student do against the power of the Emperor?"

He got into his clothes, and said:

"I'll be right back.... You! Heat the samovar."

His wife sat motionless, staring out of the window. But when the door closed behind him she turned swiftly, to shake a clenched fist after him. With bitter malice, through bared teeth, she muttered:

"The old devil! Ugh!"

Her face was swollen with tears, her left eye blue-black and almost shut. She got up and went to the stove. Bending over the samovar, she whispered fiercely:

"I'll cheat him yet! Ah, but I'll cheat him, till he howls like a wolf in the night! Don't you believe him, not a single word he says! He's trying to catch you up. It's all lies, his talk. He's not sorry, not for anybody. He's just fishing for catch. He knows all about you. That's what he lives by. Man-hunting."

She came up close to me, and said, in the voice of a beggar pleading for alms:

"Can't you be nice to me? Eh?"

She was unpleasant to me, this woman; but the one eye she turned on me gleamed with such keen and bitter suffering that I put an arm around her, and began to stroke her tousled hair. It was coarse and greasy.

"Who's he tracking now?"

"Some people in the lodging house on Ribnoryadskaya."

"What's the name?"

Smiling, she replied:

"And suppose I tell him what you ask about? There he comes now!... It was him tracked out poor Guri."

And she darted away from me, back to the stove.

Nikiforich brought bread, jam, and vodka. We sat down to tea. Marina, beside me, served me with accentuated friendliness, her one good eye looking caressingly into my face, while her husband moralized for my benefit:

"It's in people's hearts, it's in their bones—the invisible thread. Try and tear it out! Try and root it up! The tsar—to the people, he's the same as God!"

Suddenly, he asked:

"Now, you know so much about books. Ever read the Gospels? Well, then, what do you say: is all of it right, that's written there?"

"I don't know."

"To my mind, there's needless things been written in. And lots of them. For instance, about beggars: Blessed are the poor. What's so blessed about them? A little off the mark —a thing like that. And take it all around— about the poor—there's a lot that isn't clear. You've got to distinguish. There's the poor, and the impoverished. If a man's poor—what good is he? But if he's impoverished—why, maybe it's just bad luck. That's the way to look at it. It's better that way."

"Why?"

He was silent a while, looking searchingly into my face. Then he began again, speaking weightily and very distinctly. Evidently, these were ideas to which much thought had been devoted.

"There's too much pity in the Gospels, and pity's a harmful thing. That's how I look at it. Pity means spending huge amounts of money on useless people—harmful people, even. Almshouses, prisons, insane asylums. It's the strong people that ought to be helped, the healthy ones—so they won't have to waste their strength. But no; we help the weak. As if you could make the weak strong! And the upshot is, that the strong folk lose their strength, and the weak ones ride them. There

—that's the problem! There's lots of things need thinking over and revising. We've got to get it in our heads: life has turned off from the Gospels, it's turned off long since. It follows its own way. Take this Pletnyov—on account of what did he get tripped up, d'you think? On account of pity. We give alms to beggars—and no thought for students. Let them slide! Where's the logic in that?"

I had come across such ideas before. They are more persistent and more widespread than they are commonly thought to be. But I had never heard them so incisively expressed. Reading of Nietzsche, some seven years later, I vividly recalled the philosophy of the Kazan policeman. And I may remark, in passing: I have seldom found ideas in books which I had not already encountered in actual life.

The old "man-hunter" talked on and on, drumming on the edge of the tea tray in time to his words. His lean face was set in a stern frown; but it was not turned to me. He was staring into the copper mirror presented by the brightly burnished samovar.

"You ought to be going," his wife reminded him twice; but, making no reply, he went on stringing word after word on to the taut thread of his thoughts—until suddenly, with no perceptible transition, his discourse turned down a new track entirely.

"You're not a stupid lad. And literate. Is that fit work for you, in the bakery? You could make the same money, or more, doing a different sort of work for the tsar's empire. . . ."

I listened to his talk; but my mind was busy with the problem of how I was to warn the unknown people on Ribnoryadskaya that Nikiforich was tracking them. There was a man at the lodging house, one Sergei Somov, who had only recently got back from a term of exile in Yalutorovsk. I had heard a great deal about him, all very interesting.

"People with brains ought to keep together. Like bees in a hive, or wasps in their nest. The tsar's empire—"

"Look at the clock! It's nine already," the woman said.

"The devil!"

Nikiforich jumped up and began hastily buttoning his jacket.

"Oh, well, I'll take a cab. Good-bye, youngster. Come around any time."

Leaving his box, I firmly made up my mind never again to visit Nikiforich. The old man was interesting; but he was too repulsive. His talk of the harm wrought by pity disturbed me greatly. The words stuck in my memory, and would not be forgotten. I sensed some kernel of truth behind them, but it went against the grain that truth should come from a policeman.

Debates on this theme were not infrequent. One such discussion, in particular, had cruelly disturbed my mental balance.

A "Tolstoian" came to town—the first I had ever encountered. He was a tall, rawboned man, swarthy-complexioned, with a goatish black beard and the thick lips of a Negro. Somewhat stooped, he seemed to stare at the ground; but now and again, with a sudden sharp movement, he would throw back his half-bald head—and the passionate gleam of his dark, humid eyes seared to the heart. Hatred smouldered in his penetrating gaze. The discussion was held in the rooms of one of the University professors. Many young people came; and among them, a slender, dapper little priest—a Master of Divinity—in a black silk cassock that set off to great advantage the pallor of his handsome features, lit by a chill smile in his cold grey eyes.

The Tolstoian spoke at some length of the wondrous truths laid down in the Gospels, and their eternal verity. His voice was dull, his sentences brief and choppy, but the words rang strong, conveying the force of genuine conviction. Again and again, his hairy left hand swept down across his body, in a hacking sort of gesture, always the same. He kept his right hand in his pocket.

"Play-actor," someone whispered in the corner, not far from me.

"Yes, he's very theatrical."

Not long before this, I had read a book—by Draper, I believe—about the struggle of Catholicism against science; and the Tolstoian seemed to me one of those men—of frenzied faith in the salvation of the world by the power of love—who are prepared, in pure compassion, to rend and burn their fellow humans.

He wore a white shirt, with wide sleeves, and over it a shabby grey smock. This, too, set him apart from all the others in the room. Concluding his sermon, he cried:

"And so I ask: do you follow Christ, or Darwin?"

The question was flung like a stone into the corner of the room where the young people sat, crowded close together—the corner where fear and ecstasy gleamed in the wide eyes of youths and girls. The Tolstoian's speech, it seemed, had taken everyone aback. Heads were bowed in thought, and no one spoke. Sweeping the room with blazing eyes, he added sternly:

"Only Pharisees can attempt to reconcile these two irreconcilable principles. And, attempting it, they lie to themselves shamefully, and corrupt others with their lie."

The little priest got up, neatly turned back his cassock sleeves, and—smiling condescendingly—launched into fluent speech, poisonously polite:

"You evidently share in the vulgar opinion concerning the Pharisees, an opinion not only coarse, but altogether mistaken. . . ."

And, to my infinite astonishment, he went on to argue that the Pharisees should be regarded as the true and loyal guardians of the laws of the Judean people; that the people had always followed them against its enemies.

"Read Flavius Josephus, for example...."

The Tolstoian jumped up, and, repudiating Josephus with a sweeping, annihilating gesture, shouted:

"Now, too, the peoples follow their enemies, against their friends. The peoples don't act by their own will. They're driven, forced. What's your Josephus to me?"

The priest, and other disputants, shredded the fundamental question into infinitesimal tatters. It vanished from the debate.

"Truth is love," the Tolstoian maintained; and his eyes flashed hatred and contempt.

I grew drunk with words, until I could no longer grasp their meaning. The earth rocked under me, spinning in wordy whirlwind. Again and again I thought, despairingly, that no one on earth could be so stupid, so dull as I.

Mopping the sweat from his crimson cheeks, the Tolstoian shouted furiously:

"Cast aside the Gospels! Forget the Gospels! Then you won't lie! Crucify Christ once more! That will be more honest!"

Like a blank wall, the question rose before me: How is this? If life is a constant struggle for happiness on earth, then are not mercy and love but impediments in this struggle?

I found out the Tolstoian's name—Klopsky—and where he was staying, and next evening went to see him. He had stopped at the home of two young girls, country landowners; and I found him with them in the garden, sitting at table in the shade of a huge old linden. Lanky, raw-boned, angular, dressed in white, his open shirt revealing a dark, hairy chest—he fitted in very well with my conception of a homeless apostle, a preacher of truth.

With a silver spoon, he dipped raspberries and milk from the bowl before him, eating with relish, smacking his thick lips. After every spoonful, he would blow the white drops of milk from his sparse cat moustache. One of the sisters stood by the table, ready to serve him. The other was leaning against the tree, her arms folded on her chest, her eyes turned dreamily to the hot, dusty sky. Both girls wore light, lilac-coloured dresses; and they were very much alike—almost indistinguishable.

He spoke to me willingly, and kindly: of the creative power of love; of how one must develop such love in one's soul, as the only power capable of "linking man with the world spirit"—with the love that is diffused through life.

"That is the only link by which man can be bound! Without love, life cannot be understood. Those who declare that the law of life is struggle—they are blind souls, doomed to destruction. Fire cannot be quenched by fire; nor can evil be overcome by the power of evil!"

Later, however, when the girls went off together through the garden towards the house, each with her arm around the other's waist, this man, looking after them with narrowed eyes, demanded:

"And who may you be?"

When I had told him about myself, he began to talk, with a drumming of fingers on the table top, of how a man is a man, anywhere; and how one should aspire, not to change one's station in life, but to discipline one's soul in love for humankind.

"The lower a man stands, the closer he is to life's real truth, to its most sacred wisdom."

Though I felt some doubt as to his own acquaintance with this "sacred wisdom," I made no remark. I could see that he was bored. He threw me a forbidding glance; yawned, laid his hands behind his head, stretched out his legs, and drooped his eyelids wearily, mumbling, as though half asleep:

"Submission to love . . . the law of life. . . ."

With a start, he threw out his arms, clutching at something in the air; then stared at me, alarmed.

"What's that? Excuse me, but I'm very tired."

And he shut his eyes again, clenching his teeth and baring them, as if in pain. His lower lip dropped; and his upper lip drew up so that the sparse, blue-black hairs of his moustache seemed to bristle.

I took away with me a feeling of hostility towards him, and vague doubts of his sincerity.

A few days later, delivering some rolls in the early morning to a University instructor I had come to know—a bachelor, and a drunkard—I once more encountered Klopsky. He seemed to have had a sleepless night. His face was sallow, his eyelids red and swollen. I suspected that he was drunk. The fat instructor, drunk to tears, sat on the floor in his underwear, with a cigar in his hand, amidst a chaos of displaced furniture, scattered clothing, and empty beer bottles. Rocking to and fro, he roared:

"Mer-er-cy. . . ."

Klopsky shouted, harshly, angrily:

"There is no mercy! We'll be lost through love, or crushed in the struggle for love. Either way, we're doomed."

He seized me by the shoulder and dragged me up to the instructor.

"Here! Ask this fellow—ask him what he wants! Ask him—does he want to love humanity?"

The instructor looked up at me, with tear-filled eyes, and laughed.

"He's from the bakery. I owe him money."

Swaying, he thrust his hand into a pocket, produced a key, and held it out to me.

"There! Take all there is!"

But the Tolstoian seized the key, and waved me away.

"Clear out. You'll get your money another time."

He flung the rolls I had brought on to the couch in the corner.

He did not recognize me, and I was glad of that. I carried away—in my memory, his talk of doom through love; and in my heart, an utter loathing for him.

Soon afterwards I heard that he had made a declaration of love to one of the girls at whose home he was staying—and, on the same day, made a similar declaration to the other. The sisters confided in one another, and their joy turned to bitterness against their wooer. They sent the yardman to bid the proponent of love leave their house at once. He disappeared from town.

The question of love and pity, of their place in human life—an intricate and distressing problem—early confronted me: at first in the form of a keen, if but vaguely defined, sensation of inner discord; later, distinctly formulated in the clear and unambiguous query:

"What is the significance of love?"

All that I read was saturated with the ideas of Christianity, of humanism, with tearful pleas for compassion towards mankind. The same ideas were expressed, with passionate eloquence, by the finest men and women I encountered in that period.

All that I saw around me in actual life was alien, in almost every detail, to the idea of compassion. Life presented itself to me as an endless succession of enmities and cruelties, as a vile and unintermittent struggle for the possession of various trash. Myself, I desired only books. All other things, to me, were valueless.

I needed only sit an hour out of doors, beside our gate, to see that all these people—cabmen, yardmen, workers, officials, merchants—lived their lives differently from me and from the people of my choice; that they were moved by different desires, aspired to different goals. And the people I respected, the people in whom I put my faith—they were strangely alien, alone: unwanted outsiders among the great majority, among the termites painstakingly labouring, by petty filth and craft, to build up the anthill that they called life. To me, this life seemed stupid through and through. It emanated a deadly tedium. And, not infrequently, I found that people who talked of mercy and of love went no further than words; that when it came to deeds, they yielded, quite unconsciously, to the general trend of life.

It was all very difficult.

One day Lavrov, the veterinary—yellow and swollen with dropsy, panting for breath—said:

"Cruelty has to be increased till people get sick of it everywhere—till every soul on earth begins to loathe it, the way they loathe this cursed autumn!"

Autumn had come early that year, rainy and cold, heavily burdened with disease and suicide. In the end Lavrov, too, poisoned himself with potassium cyanide, rather than wait for the dropsy to strangle him.

"Cattle healer! Dosed beasts, and died like a beast himself," said the tailor, Mednikov, with whom Lavrov had boarded—a skinny little man, very devout, who could rattle off by rote every acathistus sung to the Mother of God. Mednikov regularly thrashed his children, a girl of seven and a boy of eleven, with a triple-thonged leather whip, and beat his wife across the calves of the legs with a bamboo stick. He often complained:

"The justice of the peace reprimanded me. Said I copied this system of mine from some Chinese. And I never saw a Chinese in my life, except painted ones, on signboards."

One of the workers in Mednikov's shop—a cheerless, bowlegged man known as "Dunka's husband"—said of his employer:

"Meek ones, and religious on top of it—there's the kind to be afraid of. Rowdies—you can tell what they are right off, and you always have time to hide. But the meek ones, they'll come creeping up on you, quiet and crafty, like a snake in the grass, and before you know it—you're stung, right where your heart's most open. That's the kind I'm afraid of: the meek ones."

"Dunka's husband" was a meek and crafty informer, Mednikov's favourite. But there was truth in what he said.

Sometimes it seemed to me that the meek grew like lichen on the stony heart of life; that they loosened its texture, softened it, made it more fertile. More often, however—noting their abundance, their facile adaptability to baseness, their slippery inconstancy and pliancy of soul, their thin, persistent whining—I would feel among them like a hobbled horse in a swarm of gadflies.

It was these thoughts that filled my mind as I turned home from the policeman's box.

A wind was sighing, setting the flames of the street lamps aquiver; and it seemed to be the dark-grey sky that quivered, sifting down over the earth the dust-fine October rain. A drenched prostitute moved up the street, dragging a drunken man by the arm, tugging and jerking. Whimpering, he mumbled something. The woman said, dully and wearily:

"It's fate."

"There!" I thought. "It's the same with me: I'm being dragged along too—jerked into ugly corners, confronted with filth, and sorrow, and strangely differing men and women. It's tired me out."

Not precisely in these words, perhaps; but such, in its essence, was the thought that came to me that wretched evening. It was then that I first realized my weariness of soul, first sensed the caustic mould eating at my heart. From that time on, my state of mind grew steadily worse. I began to see myself with the eyes of a bystander—cold eyes, alien and hostile.

In almost every human soul, I began to sense a bristling and unordered cohabitation of contradictions—contradictions not only of word and deed, but also of emotions, the fitful play of which particularly oppressed me. In my own soul, too, I observed this play; and that was worst of all. I was drawn in every direction: to women and to books, to working folk and to the jolly studentry; but I had not the time to satisfy any of these inclinations. I spun from one thing to another, like a whirling top; and an unknown hand, unseen but powerful, whipped me on with an invisible lash.

Learning that Yakov Shaposhnikov had been taken to the hospital, I went to visit him there. But a fat, wry-mouthed woman in spectacles, with a white kerchief tied behind limp, red, parboiled ears, told me indifferently:

"He's dead."

As I did not leave, but stood there silently, blocking her way, she lost her temper and demanded crossly:

"Well? What else?"

Then I, too, lost my temper, and said:

"You're a stupid fool."

"Nikolai! Throw him out!"

Nikolai was busy with a rag, polishing some sort of copper rods. Grunting, he brought one of these rods down across my back. At this, I swung him up in my arms, carried him out at the door, and sat him down in a puddle near the hospital steps. He took this treatment quietly. For a moment or two he sat where I had put him, without a word, staring up at me. Then, getting to his feet, he said:

"Ekh! Just a son of a. . . ."

I went to the Derzhavin park, and sat down on a bench by the monument to the poet. I felt a burning desire to do something ugly, something scandalous, so that crowds of people might attack me and, by their attack, give me the right to thrash out at them. But, though it was not a working day, the park was deserted, and there was not a soul to be seen in the streets round about. Only the gusty wind swept past, driving dead leaves before it and rustling the loose corner of a placard pasted on a lamp-post nearby.

Dusk was gathering. The air grew cold, and the sky turned a dark, translucent blue. The monument towered over me like a huge bronze idol. Staring up at it, I thought to myself: here a man lived on this earth—Yakov, a lone soul, fighting God with all the power of his spirit; and he has died an ordinary death. Perfectly ordinary. There was something very slighting about that, something very hard to bear.

And that Nikolai was an idiot. He ought to have fought, or called the police and had me jailed.

I went to see Rubtsov, and found him bent over the table in his hole of a room, mending his jacket by the light of a tiny lamp.

"Yakov's dead."

The old man lifted his hand, still holding the needle. He was evidently about to cross himself—but cut the gesture short. His thread got caught on something, and, very softly, he mumbled an obscene curse.

After a while, he muttered:

"For the matter of that—we'll all of us die, in time. It's a silly habit people have. Yes, that's how it goes. Yakov—he's dead. Well, and there was a coppersmith around here, and he's gone, too. Last Sunday. The gendarmes took him. Through Guri, it was, I got to know him—the coppersmith. A clever fellow! And friendly with the students. They're raising some sort of rumpus, the students—have you heard? Here, sew up this jacket for me. I can't see what I'm doing."

He handed me his rags, and the needle and thread, and began pacing up and down the room, his hands behind his back, muttering, between coughs:

"Now here, now there, a flame leaps up. And then—the devil puffs it out, and the same old humdrum starts all over again. This is an unlucky town. I'm getting out, before the river freezes and the boats stop."

He stopped short, and demanded, scratching his bald skull:

"Only—where to? There's no place I haven't been. Not a one. Yes, I've wandered about—and wore myself out. And that's all the good it's done me."

He spat, and added:

"Life—damn it! Live, work, strain, and—nothing gained, not for soul nor body."

He was silent a while, standing in the corner by the door, seeming to listen for something. Then, rapidly, he strode across the room and perched beside me, on the table edge.

"What I say is this, Alexei of mine, Maximich: it's a shame Yakov spent his great heart that way, on God. God won't improve any, nor the tsar, neither, by my denying them. The thing is, for people to get angry at their own selves, and say 'No!' to all the rotten life they're living. That's what! Ekh, I'm an old man. Born too late. It won't be long before I go stone blind. It's too bad, brother. Finished that jacket? Thanks.... Let's go to the tavern and have some tea."

On the way to the tavern—stumbling in

the darkness, and catching at my shoulder for support—he continued:

"You mark my word. People's patience will end some day. They'll get their tempers up, and go smashing everything—smash all their rotten trash to smithereens. People's patience will end."

We never got to the tavern. We came up with a crowd of river sailors, besieging the gates of a brothel, which were being defended by workers from the Alafuzov mill.

"There's a fight here every holiday," said Rubtsov approvingly, pulling off his spectacles. And, recognizing friends among the defending party, he immediately joined in the battle, shouting encouragement to his mates:

"Hold it, weavers! Squash the frogs! Brain the minnows! E-ekh!"

It was strange to see his enthusiasm—this clever old man—and the proficiency with which he set about fighting his way through the crowd of rivermen: parrying blows, and felling opponents by swift shoulder thrusts. The crowd fought gaily, without malice—for the fun of it, as an outlet for surplus energy.

A dark mass of bodies pressed the mill workers back, until the board gates creaked protestingly. Cheerful cries rang out:

"Get the bald trooper!"

Two of the fighters climbed on to the roof of the house, and started a lusty tune:

We're no thieves, nor we're no robbers, nor
no highwaymen,
We're the lads that laugh at lubbers, aye,
we're fishermen!

A policeman's whistle shrilled, and copper buttons flashed in the darkness. Mud squelched underfoot. The song on the roof swung on:

We cast out our nets and drag 'em where
the shores are never wet,
Through the fat old merchants' houses,
through their cellars and their sheds.

"Hold on! Don't hit a man lying down!"

"Grandad! Look out, there!"

Finally Rubtsov and I, with five or six others—friends and foes—were led off towards the police station; and through the new quiet of the autumn night the song floated after us:

Hey! Forty fish our nets brought in—
Squirrel, sable, beaver skin!

"The Volga folk—they can't be beat!" Rubtsov exclaimed elatedly, spitting blood and blowing his bruised nose. In my ear, he whispered, "You get out of this. Watch your chance, and—run! What do you want to go to the lockup for?"

I made a dash into a side street. A lanky sailor followed my example. We jumped a fence, and then another, and—that was the last I ever saw of my clever, lovable friend, Nikita Rubtsov.

My life was becoming more and more a vacuum. Student unrest began. I could not understand it, could not grasp its aims or causes. I saw the gay to-do, but failed to perceive the genuine struggle behind it; and I felt that, for the bliss of studying at the University, even torture might be endured. Had I been told:

"You may study; but, for that, you'll be cudgelled on the Nikolayevskaya Square every Sunday"—I would most probably have agreed.

Looking in at Semyonov's bakery, I learned that the workers there were planning a trip to the University, to beat up the students.

"We'll take some iron weights along," the bakers declared, with cheery malice.

I tried to argue with them. But suddenly, with what was almost horror, I discovered that I had no desire to champion the students, that I could find nothing to say in their defence.

I left the basement, I recall, sick and staggering, carrying in my heart an unconquerable, an utterly annihilating anguish.

Far into the night I sat on the bank of the Kaban flinging stones into the black water and thinking one and the same thought, in one and the same words, endlessly repeated:

"What am I to do?"

To fill the emptiness, I began studying the violin—fiddling in the shop by night, to the discomfort of the watchman and the mice. I loved music, and gave myself eagerly to this new interest. But one night I left the shop for a moment during a lesson; and my teacher —a violinist from the theatre orchestra—opened the cash drawer, which I had neglected to lock. Returning to the shop, I found him stuffing his pockets with money. He stretched his head forward, when he saw me in the doorway, and presented his dreary, shaven face as for a blow. Quietly, he said:

"All right. Hit out."

His lips were quivering, and greasy tears, strangely large, streamed from his colourless eyes.

I had the impulse to strike him. To prevent this, I sat down on the floor, with my fists under me, and ordered him to put the money back in the drawer. He emptied his pockets and started for the door—but stopped, and said, in a high-pitched, idiotic, fearful voice:

"Give me ten rubles!"

I gave him ten rubles. But I stopped my music.

In December I made up my mind to kill myself. I have since attempted—in a story called *An Incident in the Life of Makar*—to describe the background of this decision. But

I have not succeeded. The story is clumsy and disagreeable, and devoid of all inner truth. Yet—it seems to me—this very absence of inner truth forms its chief merit. The facts are truthfully related; but their interpretation does not seem mine, and the entire story does not seem to relate to me. Apart from any question of literary value, there is something pleasant to me about this story, as in a victory over self.

I bought a drum major's revolver, charged with four cartridges, at the market-place, and sent a bullet into my chest. I meant to reach the heart, but succeeded only in piercing the lung; and a month later, feeling extremely foolish and very much ashamed, I was back at work again in the bakery.

Not for long, however. Coming up from the bakery one evening, towards the end of March, I found Khokhol sitting by the window in the room behind the shop. He was smoking a thick cigarette, and staring thoughtfully into the cloud of smoke around him.

"Have you some time to spare?" he asked me, without greetings.

"Twenty minutes."

"Sit down. I'd like to speak to you."

As always, he was tightly buttoned up in his coarse cloth coat, his fair beard spread out across his broad chest and his close-cropped hair bristling stiffly over his stubborn forehead. He wore heavy, peasant boots, smelling strongly of tar.

"Now, then," he began quietly. "Would you care to come out to my place? I live in Krasnovidovo village, forty-five versts down the Volga—keep a shop there. You'll help me about the shop—that won't take much of your time. I have a good library, and I can help you get some learning. Agreed?"

"Yes."

"Be at Kurbatov's wharf at six o'clock on Friday morning, and ask for the boat from Krasnovidovo—owner, Vasili Pankov. Though you'll really have no need to ask. I'll be there before you. Good evening."

Rising to leave, he held out a broad hand to me, then produced a heavy silver watch from an inside pocket, and said:

"It took us six minutes. Oh, yes—my name is Romass. Mikhailo Antonovich. There."

He left without a backward glance—striding firmly, with an easy swing to his big, powerfully-moulded frame.

Two days later I set out for Krasnovidovo.

The Volga—only recently broken free of its bonds. Soggy grey ice blocks float downstream, swaying in the muddy current. Our boat keeps overtaking them, and they rub, creaking, against the sides. Some splinter when we strike them, sending off a spray of sharp-edged crystals. A brisk wind is blowing, driving the waves far up the banks; and the sun's dazzling rays are reflected in white sheaves of light from the glassy-blue sides of the ice blocks. The boat, heavily laden with boxes, barrels, sacks, is running under sail. Pankov holds the tiller. This is a young peasant, dressed with some pretension. His jacket, of tanned sheepskin, is embroidered across the chest with varicoloured cords.

Pankov's face is calm, his eyes cold. He seems reserved, and little like a peasant. Astride the bow, a boat hook in his hands, stands Pankov's hired labourer, Kukushkin: an untidy little fellow, in a torn coat belted with a bit of rope, and a crumpled hat that was once a priest's. Kukushkin's face is badly cut and bruised. Thrusting out at the ice blocks with his long hook, he grunts contemptuously:

"Get away! Where d'you think you're going?"

Romass and I sit on the boxes piled below the sail. Quietly, he says:

"The peasants don't like me—particularly the richer ones. And, of course, you'll get your share of their dislike."

Kukushkin lays his hook down across the bows and turns his battered face towards us, putting in, with evident relish:

"It's the priest, Antonich, hates you worst of all."

"That's so," Pankov agrees.

"You're like a bone in the throat to him—the pock-marked cur!"

"But I have friends, too. They'll be your friends as well," Khokhol continues.

The air is chill. The bright March sun sends down but little warmth. Dark, bare-branched trees sway on the river banks: and here and there, in sheltered fissures, or in the shade of the bushes lining the bluff bank, there still lie patches of velvet snow. The river is dotted with drifting ice blocks, like a flock of sheep at pasture. It seems to me that I am in a dream.

Kukushkin, stuffing his pipe with tobacco, wanders into philosophy:

"You're no wife of his, that's true enough—the priest. Only that's his job, isn't it? To love all creatures, the way it's written in the books."

"Who was it bruised you up like that?" Romass asks him, chuckling.

"Nobody much. Some sort of shady folk—thieves, their job is, I shouldn't wonder," Kukushkin answers, with fine contempt. Then—proudly—he adds:

"Some soldiers beat me up, once—'tillery men. Well, that was something! I don't know how I ever came out alive."

"What made 'em do it?" asks Pankov.

"When—yesterday? Or the 'tillery men?"

"Umm. . . . Yesterday."

"As if you can tell what they come down on you for! Our folk—they're just like billy goats. Butt right out, for the least little thing. As if that was their job: using their fists."

"To my mind," Romass says," "it's your tongue they thrash you for. You're too careless about what you say."

"That's likely so. Inquisitive, I am. It's a habit I've got—always asking people questions. Makes me happy if I can get to hear anything new."

The nose of the boat strikes in full career against an ice block. Another block grates menacingly along the side. Kukushkin sways for an instant, then catches up his hook. Pankov tells him reprovingly:

"Keep your eyes on your work, Stepan!"

"Then don't get me to talking," Kukushkin mumbles, thrusting out at the ice. "I can't do my job and go chattering with you, too, all at the same time."

They begin a good-humoured bickering; and Romass turns back to me.

"The soil here is worse than in my home places, out in the Ukraine. But the people are better. Gifted, capable!"

I listen attentively, with willing trust. I like his calm manner, his even speech—simple, yet forceful. Here, I feel, is a man of extensive learning; a man, moreover, who has worked out criteria of his own in regard to his fellow men. Also, it is very pleasant that he does not ask me why I tried to kill myself. Anyone else, in his place, would be sure to have asked long since; and I am so tired of that question! Nor is it an easy one to answer. The devil only knows why I wanted to kill myself. To Khokhol, should he ask, I would probably reply long-windedly, foolishly. And in any case, I have no desire to think about that now. The Volga is so fine, so bright, so open.

We keep our boat to the shelter of the high bank. On our left lies the broad sweep of the river, invading the sandy beach of the low bank opposite. I can see the river rising, reaching up to spatter and toss the bushes beyond the sand; and, rushing to meet it, filling every crack and hollow in the ground—the bright, tumultuous waters of the spring. The sun smiles down, and in its rays the yellow-billed rooks—cawing and bustling, building their nests—shine blue-black as burnished steel. On open stretches, grass-shoots, vivid green, push bravely upward to the sun. My limbs are chilled; but in my heart I feel a quiet joy, and tender shoots of radiant hope are sprouting. The earth is a very pleasant place in spring.

We reached Krasnovidovo at noon. On the high, flat-topped bluff stood a blue-domed church; and from the church, along the edge of the bluff, stretched a line of sturdy, well-built peasant houses, catching the sunlight in the yellow gleam of shingle or the bright brocade of thatch. Simple, and pleasing to the eye.

I had often admired this village, passing by it on the Volga steamboats.

Kukushkin and I began unloading the boat. Romass, handing me sacks over the side, remarked:

"You're certainly strong!"

And—his eyes on the sack he held—he asked:

"No pain in your chest?"

"None at all."

I was very touched by the tactful form of his question. I would have been most reluctant to have the peasants learn of my attempt to kill myself.

"Yes, you're strong enough. Over and above the job, as you might say," Kukushkin put in loquaciously. "What gubernia do you come from, youngster? Nizhni-Novgorod? You're one of the water-bibbers, then—that's what folks call you. Or—'Say, can you say where the gulls fly today?' That's about Nizhni, too."

A tall, lean peasant in cotton shirt and trousers, with a curly beard and a thick crown of reddish hair, came striding rapidly down the slope. His bare feet, slipping on the soggy clay, disturbed the silvery gleam of innumerable rivulets.

Reaching the bank, he said clearly, caressingly:

"Welcome home."

A glance at our work; and he bent down, picked up two thick poles, and laid them across from the bank to the side of the boat. Then, springing easily into the boat, he ordered:

"Get ready for the barrels! You, youngster, come here and help."

He was remarkably handsome, and, apparently, very strong. Light-blue eyes, gleaming sternly; ruddy cheeks, and a straight, massive nose.

"You'll catch cold, Izot," Romass told him.

"Who—me? Never fear!"

We rolled a barrel of kerosene to shore. Izot looked me up and down, and asked:

"Come to help in the shop?"

"Try and wrestle him," Kukushkin suggested.

"I see you got your mug smashed up again."

"Well, what can you do with that sort?"

"With what sort?"

"The ones that smash your mug."

"Umph!" Izot returned disgustedly; and, turning to Romass, said: "The carts will be here right away. I sighted you way up the river, sailing along. Good time, you made. You go on home, Antonich. I'll take care of things here."

His attitude to Romass was clearly friendly and solicitous—protective, even, though Romass was some ten years his elder.

Half an hour later I entered a village house, new-built, with walls still smelling of resin and tow. The living room was clean and cosy, and a sharp-eyed peasant woman was moving briskly about it, setting the table for dinner. Khokhol was taking books out of an open suitcase and arranging them on shelves beside the stove.

"Your room is in the attic," he said.

From my attic window I could see part of the village, and—opposite our house—a gully, overgrown with bushes, with bath-house roofs protruding here and there. Beyond the gully lay orchards and black fields, rolling away to the blue line of woods at the horizon. Astride the ridge of a bath-house roof sat a blue-clad peasant, holding a hatchet. Shading his eyes with his hand, he was staring down at the Volga. Cart wheels creaked. A cow lowed heavily. A gurgling of water filled the air. An old woman, all in black, came out of a gateway, and, turning to look back, said loudly:

"Curse you!"

At the sound of her voice two little boys, who had been energetically damming up a rivulet with stones and mud, jumped up and ran away as fast as their legs could carry them. The old woman picked up a chip of wood, spat on it, and dropped it into the rivulet. Then she brought down her foot, shod in a heavy man's boot, on the children's dam, and moved off down the slope towards the Volga.

What sort of life was in store for me here?

I was called to dinner. Downstairs, I found Izot sitting by the table, his long legs stretched out in front of him. His bare feet were bluish red. He had been talking to Romass; but he broke off when I came in.

"Well, what's up?" Romass demanded glumly. "Go on."

"That's all. So it's decided, then: we'll manage by ourselves. Keep a revolver on you, or take a good heavy stick, when you go outdoors. Don't talk too much when Barinov's around. He and Kukushkin—their tongues are loose, like women's. You, youngster—do you like fishing?"

"No."

Romass began to speak of the need to organize the small peasant fruitgrowers, to free them from the clutches of the big buyers. Izot listened attentively. Finally, he said:

"That way, the bigbellies won't give you any peace at all."

"We'll see."

"You mark my word!"

Watching Izot, I reflected:

"It must be such peasants Karonin and Zlatovratsky draw the people in their stories from."

Could it be that I had come in contact, here, with something really earnest? That I would now be working with people who were getting something done?

Finishing his dinner, Izot said:

"Don't you hurry things, Mikhailo Antonovich. A good thing never works out fast. You've got to go easy."

When he had left, Romass said meditatively:

"There's a clever man. And honest. Unfortunately, illiterate—he can barely read; but he's working hard to learn. You can help him in that."

We were busy until evening going over the prices of the goods in the shop. He told me:

"I sell cheaper than the other two shopkeepers here, and—of course—they don't like it. They play me every trick they can. Now they're planning to thrash me. It's not any love for trading that keeps me here, or any profit I get out of it. There are other reasons.

This shop is something on the order of that bakery of yours."

I said that I had guessed as much.

"Yes, of course. People have to be taught, somehow—isn't that so?"

The shop was locked and shuttered. Carrying a lamp, we moved from shelf to shelf. And, just outside, someone else moved up and down with us. We could hear the cautious footsteps, squelching through the mud, or, now and again, stumping heavily up to the porch.

"There—do you hear him? That's Migun—a lone fellow, without land or kin. He's a malicious beast. Loves to do evil, as a pretty girl loves to flirt. Be careful what you talk about with him; and—not only with him."

Afterwards, in the living room again, he settled himself comfortably, his broad back against the stove, lit his pipe, and, puffing out little jets of smoke into his beard, his eyes narrowed thoughtfully, began slowly shaping words into clear and simple speech. He had long been noticing, he said, how vainly I was casting away my youth.

"You're capable, and persevering; and your aims are evidently praiseworthy. What you need is study—only not the kind of study that will make books a barrier between you and the people around you. There was an old man once—a sectarian—who said, very justly, 'Everything that's taught or learned comes from man.' What people teach you comes more painfully than book learning. Their teaching is harsh. But what you learn that way takes deeper root."

Further, he expressed the familiar thought that, first and foremost, the minds of the peasantry must be awakened. But now, in the familiar words, I sensed a new and more profound significance.

"Those students of yours, in the city, do a lot of talking about loving the people. Well, and I tell them—no, it can't be done. You can't love the people. It's nothing but talk—such love."

He chuckled into his beard, with a searching glance at me. Now he began pacing up and down the room, continuing earnestly, impressively:

"Love—that means: concur, condescend, disregard, forgive. That's all very well, when you love a woman. But the people—can we disregard the people's ignorance, concur with their delusions, condescend to their every baseness, forgive their brutality? Can we do that?"

"No."

"There it is! Your friends in the city all read Nekrasov, sing Nekrasov. Well, I can only say—you won't get far on Nekrasov! The peasant has to be told, 'Look here, brother! You're not a bad fellow, so far as that goes; but the life you live is bad, and you don't know how to do the least little thing to make your life easier and better. A brute beast, really, looks after its needs more sensibly than you look after yours. It defends itself better than you defend yourself. And yet you peasants—you're the source of everything. Nobility, clergy, scholars, tsars—they were all peasants in the past. See? Clear enough? Well, then—learn to live so you won't be trampled.' "

He went out to the kitchen and asked the cook to heat the samovar. Returning, he began showing me his books, most of which were devoted to one or another of the sciences.

There were Buckle, Lyell, Lecky, Lubbock, Taylor, Mill, Spencer, Darwin, and, of Russian authors: Pisarev, Dobrolyubov, Chernyshevsky, Pushkin, Goncharov's *Frigate "Pallada,"* Nekrasov.

His broad palm stroked the bindings caressingly—as one might caress so many kittens. Almost emotionally, he murmured:

"Good books, all! This one, say: it's a great rarity. The censors ordered it burnt. If you want to know what the state really is—read this."

He handed me Hobbes' *Leviathan.*

"This one's about the state too; but it's lighter, gayer."

The gay book turned out to be Machiavelli's *Il Principe.*

At tea, he told me briefly about himself. He was the son of a Chernigov blacksmith. Working as a train oiler at the Kiev railway station, he had come into contact with revolutionaries, and had organized a workers' study group. Then he had been arrested, and, after some two years in prison, had been exiled for ten years to the Yakutsk region.

"At first I thought it would be the end of me, living out there, in a Yakut *uluss*. The winter there—damn it all, it seemed to freeze a man's brains in his head! And anyway, brains seemed superfluous there. But after a while I discovered that there were Russians round about, in one *uluss* and another. Few and far between, but still, they were there! And so we wouldn't feel lonely, more and more were being sent on. Very considerate! They were fine people. There was one student, particularly—Vladimir Korolenko. His term ended soon after mine. He and I were good friends for a time, but then we drifted apart. We resembled one another in many things, and friendship based on resemblance doesn't seem to work. But he's earnest, persistent; clever at any kind of work. He even tried painting icons. I didn't like that. He writes for the literary magazines now, they say, and writes quite well."

Romass talked for a long time that evening. Until midnight. Evidently, he wanted me to realize firmly, from the very outset, that my place was at his side. Never before had I experienced such grave pleasure of companionship. Since my attempt at suicide, I had fallen greatly in my own estimation. I thought myself an empty, worthless creature. A sense of guilt oppressed me, and I felt ashamed to be alive. This Romass must have divined; and, simply, tactfully opening his own life before me, he restored my balance. An unforgettable day.

On Sunday we opened the shop for trade after church was over, and at once people began to gather by our porch. The first to appear was Matvei Barinov: dirty, dishevelled, with the long arms of an ape, and with an absent look in his handsome, womanish eyes.

"What's new in the city?" he asked, when he had greeted Romass—and, without waiting for an answer, called to Kukushkin, who was just coming up:

"Stepan! Your cats killed another cock!"

The next instant he was informing us that the governor had left Kazan for St. Petersburg, to see the tsar and get him to order all the Tatars moved out to the Caucasus and Turkestan. He praised the governor.

"A clever man! He knows his business."

"You invented all that," Romass told him calmly.

"Me? When?"

"That I don't know."

"Of course, you never do believe a person, Antonich," Barinov said, shaking his head reproachfully. "Me, I'm sorry for the Tatars. The Caucasus needs getting used to."

A lean little fellow, in a ragged coat that had evidently once belonged to a bigger man, sidled warily up. A nervous tic distorted his drab features, parting the dark lips in a sickly smile. His sharp left eye winked constantly; and, each time, the scarred grey eyebrow above it quivered.

"Here's to Migun!" said Barinov derisively. "What did you steal last night?"

"Your money," Migun returned, in a clear, ringing tenor, and tipped his cap to Romass.

Our landlord and neighbour, Pankov, came out, in a citified jacket, with a red kerchief round his neck, shiny overshoes on his feet, and a silver chain the length of a pair of reins strung across his chest. Looking Migun severely up and down, he said:

"Get in my vegetable beds again, and I'll take a club to you, you old devil!"

"The usual thing," Migun remarked tranquilly, and added, with a sigh, "Life gets too dull, if you can't crack someone's skull."

Pankov began to shout at him angrily; but Migun went on:

"And who says I'm old? Forty-six—old?"

"Last Christmas you were fifty-three," Barinov cried. "You said yourself you were fifty-three! Why lie?"

Suslov* came up—a dignified, bearded old man; then Izot, the fisherman, and others, some ten in all. Khokhol sat on the porch, by the shop door, smoking his pipe and listening silently to the peasants, who settled down on the porch steps and on the benches to either side.

It was a cold, chequered day. Clouds drove swiftly across the blue sky, still seeming unthawed after the winter frosts; and spots of light and shade flickered and drowned in puddles and rivulets—now dazzling bright, now caressing the eye with velvet softness. Girls in bright holiday dresses drifted down the street towards the Volga. Crossing puddles, they would raise their skirts, revealing shoes of stiff, heavy leather. Little boys ran by, with crude fishing rods over their shoulders. Slow-moving peasants cast sidelong glances at the group outside our shop, and silently tipped their caps or thick felt hats.

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* I do not remember the peasants' family names too clearly. Probably, I have confused or distorted them.

Migun and Kukushkin engaged in amicable dispute over the unsettled question: which hit harder—merchants or gentry? Kukushkin argued for the merchant; but Migun advocated the landowner, and his ringing tenor overpowered Kukushkin's shambling speech.

"Mister Fingerov's dad, he pulled Napoleon Bonaparte by the whiskers. And Mister Fingerov—he'd grab any two by their coat collars, and swing 'em apart, and bang their heads together—and that was that! They'd topple over like logs."

"That's enough to topple you," Kukushkin agreed; but added, "Well, anyway, a merchant eats more than a gentleman."

Up on the top step, the fine-looking old man, Suslov, grumbled:

"The peasants—they're losing their footing, Mikhailo Antonovich! Under the gentry, you weren't allowed to idle. Everyone had his work he had to do."

"Why don't you send a petition in, to have serfdom brought back?" Izot retorted. Romass threw him a silent glance, and began knocking out his pipe against the railing.

I kept waiting for him to begin to speak. And, listening attentively to the peasants' disconnected talk, I tried to guess just what Khokhol would say. Already, it seemed to me, he had let slip any number of opportunities for joining in the conversation. But he maintained an impassive silence. Motionless as an idol, he sat watching the wind ruffle the water in the puddles and drive the clouds into one dark-grey mass. Down on the river, a steamboat whistled. Girls' shrill voices floated up the slope, singing to the strains of an accordion. Hiccuping and yelling, a drunken man came down the street. His arms milled wildly, and his legs bent strangely under him. He kept stumbling into puddles. The peasants' talk was slow. A dreary despondency sounded in their words; and I, too, felt vague stirrings of melancholy: because the cold sky threatened rain, and because my mind wandered back to the unceasing hubbub of the city—the diversity of sounds, the swift passing and change of people in the streets, the brisk speech, the abundance of thought-provoking words.

At tea, I asked Khokhol when he did his talking with the peasants.

"Talking? What about?"

"Ah," he said, after my explanation, which he heard out with grave attention. "Well, you see, if I were to talk to them about such things—and out in the street, at that—I'd be sent off again to live with the Yakuts."

He filled his pipe and lit it, puffing until the smoke came up in a thick cloud around him. Then he began to speak, quietly, memorably. The peasant, he said, is wary, suspicious. He mistrusts himself, mistrusts his neighbours, mistrusts—above all—any stranger. It is not thirty years since he received his freedom; every peasant of forty was born a serf, and remembers it. What this freedom means is hard to understand. If you look at it simply, freedom seems to mean: I live as I please. But—wherever you turn, you come up against officials, authorities; and they all stand in the way of living as you please. It was the tsar took the peasants away from the landowners;

hence, it would seem, the tsar is now sole master over all the peasantry. But again: and what about this freedom? A day may come—all unexpected—when the tsar will explain just what it means. The peasant has great faith in the tsar—sole master of all the land and of all wealth. The tsar took the peasants away from the landowners; and he may take the ships and the shops away from the merchants. The peasant is a tsarist. Many masters, he feels, are a bad thing; one master—less bad. He is waiting for a day when the tsar will explain to him the real significance of freedom. And then—grab every man what he can. Everyone desires that day, and yet—each fears it; each lives in secret trembling lest he miss that decisive day of universal redistribution. And—each mistrusts his own abilities. He wants much, and there is much to be taken; but—how is he to take it? Everyone wants these very same things. And then, wherever you turn—no end of officials, manifestly hostile to the peasant, yes, and to the tsar as well. Yet you can't get on without officials, either; people would all be at one another's throats.

Angrily, the wind spattered the heavy spring rain against our windows. A grey murk filled the world outside. And a dreary greyness filled my heart. The low, calm voice continued thoughtfully:

"Make the peasant understand that he must learn, little by little, to take the tsar's power into his own hands; explain to him that the people must have the right to elect their officials from their own ranks—to elect their stanovoi,* and their governor, and the tsar, too. . . ."

"That will take a hundred years!"

"And were you hoping to be done by Trinity Sunday?" Khokhol asked gravely.

In the evening he went out somewhere. Towards eleven o'clock, I heard a shot in the street, very near the house. Darting out into the rain and darkness, I saw Mikhailo Antonovich coming up to the gate—a big, dark figure, carefully and unhurriedly avoiding the streams of water that crossed his path.

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* *Stanovoi*—chief police officer in a stan (a subdivision of the uyezd, or district).—*Tr.*

"What brings you out—the shooting? That was me."

"What happened?"

"Why, some sort of fellows tried to set on me, just down the street, with clubs. I told them to drop it, or I'd shoot. That did no good. Well, and so I fired a shot up in the air. You can't hurt the air!"

He stopped in the entry to pull off his wet things, and wring the water out of his beard—shaking his head, and snorting as horses do.

"These damned boots of mine seem to be holey. I'll have to change. Can you clean a revolver? Do me that favour, before it rusts. Smear it with kerosene."

How I admired his unruffled serenity, the quiet obstinacy I read in his grey eyes! We went inside. Combing out his beard before the mirror, he cautioned me:

"Keep your wits about you out of doors, especially evenings, and holidays. I suppose they'll be wanting to thrash you, too. Only don't go carrying a stick. That sort of thing heats rowdies' tempers; and it might make them think you're frightened. And there's really nothing to fear. They're a cowardly lot."

A very pleasant life began for me. Each day brought something new and vital. I plunged into eager reading of books on the natural sciences; for Romass advised:

"That's what you want to know first of all, and best of all, Maximich. Man's finest reasoning powers have gone into these sciences."

Three evenings a week, I helped Izot with his reading and writing. He seemed suspicious of me at first, receiving my instruction with a certain irony; but after a few lessons he remarked good-naturedly:

"You're good at it, youngster. A teacher—that's what you ought to be."

And, suddenly, he proposed:

"Look—you seem strong. Let's try a tug."

We got a stick from the kitchen, and sat down on the floor, feet to feet, each grasping the stick with both hands. For some time we struggled vainly, each trying to lift the other from the floor, while Khokhol chuckled and urged us on:

"Now! now! Up with him!"

Izot finally pulled me up; and this seemed to dispose him still further in my favour.

"Never mind," he told me. "You're strong enough. It's a pity you don't like fishing, or you could come out on the Volga with me. It's just paradise—out on the Volga, at night!"

He studied diligently, making quite good progress; and, amazed at his own knowledge, expressed this feeling very winningly. Sometimes, interrupting a lesson, he would jump up suddenly and pick a book at random from the shelves. His eyebrows lifted, his voice strained with effort, he would read two or three lines aloud—and then, flushing, turn to me to exclaim incredulously:

"I can read! Did you ever hear the like?"

And, with closed eyes, he would repeat:

Loud wails the snipe o'er the flatland so
dreary,
As mother's heart mourns o'er the grave
of her dear one....

"And how do you like that?"

A few times he asked—cautiously, in a half-whisper:

"Can't you explain it to me, brother? How it comes about? Here a man looks at these little crooks and curlicues, and they turn into words, and—I know those words! Our own words, that we're always using! But how do I know them? There's nobody whispering them in my ear. If it was pictures—well, then I could understand. But this way—it's like as if I saw somebody's very thoughts, printed right here on the page. How can it be?"

What answer could I give him? And he was grieved by my "I don't know."

"Witchcraft!" he would say, sighing, and hold up the printed pages to the light.

There was a pleasant, touching naïveté about him, a something transparent and childlike. More and more, he recalled to my mind the idealized peasant one read about in books. A poet, as most fishermen are, he loved the Volga, loved the hush of night, solitude, the contemplative life.

Looking up at the stars, he questioned me:

"Khokhol says, maybe there's some kind of living creatures out there too, the same as here. Is that so, d'you think? If a person could signal them—ask how they live! Better than us, most like. Jollier."

Essentially, he was satisfied with the life he led. He was an orphan, and unmarried, entirely independent in his peaceful and well-loved occupation, fishing. But he disliked his fellow villagers, and cautioned me against them:

"Don't you heed their soft talk. They're a foxy lot, and deceitful. Don't you trust 'em! Today they show you one face, and tomorrow they'll show you another. Not a one of them cares for anyone but himself, and anything for the common good—that's the worst sort of burden!"

And of the village "bigbellies" he spoke with a hatred strange to observe in so gentle-souled a creature:

"How do they come to be richer than the rest? Because they're cleverer. Well, then, blast 'em, if they're so clever, then there's one thing they've got to know: the thing for the peasantry is to keep together, in one herd, without any quarrelling. That way, it's strong. But instead, they split the village, like a log into kindling wood. That's what they do! Their own enemies. A scoundrelly lot. Just look at all the trouble they're giving Khokhol!"

Handsome and vigorous, he had a strong

attraction for women, and they gave him no peace.

"They spoil me, true enough," he confessed good-naturedly. "The husbands—they don't like it. And neither would I, if I was in their boots. Only, how can you help being nice to a woman? A woman, she's like your second soul. The life she lives—no fun, no kindness. Works like a horse, and—that's all. Husbands have no time for love, but me—I'm as free as the wind. They taste their husbands' fists, many of 'em, before a year's out after the wedding. Yes, I fool around with them. I own to that. There's only one thing I ask them: 'Don't you be angry with one another. I can take care of you all. Don't go envying one another. You're all alike to me. I'm sorry for every one!' "

And, with a shamefaced smile, he continued:

"I almost sinned with a lady, even, once. There was a city lady came out here and took a place for the summer. Beautiful, she was—her skin as white as milk, and her hair like flax; and her eyes were blue as blue, with a kind look in them. I'd bring her fish to sell, and—every time—I couldn't turn my eyes away. 'What's wrong with you?' she says. 'You know yourself,' I say. 'Well,' she says, 'so be it. I'll come out to you tonight. Be waiting!' And sure enough, she came. Only—the mosquitoes bothered her. Bit her up, the mosquitoes did; well, and we couldn't get anywhere. 'I can't bear it,' she says, 'the way they bite'—and she was almost crying. Her husband came next day. Some sort of a judge. Yes, that's the way ladies are," Izot concluded, in a tone of wistful reproach. "They let mosquitoes spoil their lives."

He spoke with high praise of Kukushkin.

"You mark him. There's a man with a soul, and a fine one! People don't like him, but—they're wrong! He's a chatterbox, of course, only—after all, who's perfect?"

Kukushkin had no land, and worked as a hired labourer for Pankov. His wife, too, was a hired labourer—a drunken woman, small, but very strong and agile, and with a bitter temper. They had let their house to the blacksmith, and themselves lived in their bath-house, in the gully. Kukushkin had a passion for news; and when there was no news, would make up all sorts of tales himself—invariably in one and the same vein.

"Have you heard, Mikhailo Antonovich? The Tinkovo uryadnik's* taking vows to be a monk, to drop his job. 'I can't abuse the peasants any more,' he says. 'I've had enough!' "

Khokhol remarked, with perfect gravity:

"You'll be losing all your officials, pretty soon, if things go on that way."

Picking hay, straw, chicken feathers out of his uncombed hair, Kukushkin considered this proposition.

"I wouldn't say all of them. Only—the ones with a conscience, of course, it's hard on them to do their jobs. You don't believe in conscience, Antonich. I can see you don't. But just the same, a man can't live without a conscience, I don't care how clever he is. Now, there was a lady once. . . ."

And he began a tale about some "terribly clever" landed proprietress.

"She was so wicked cruel, the governor, even, came out to see her, for all his high place and job. 'Ma'am,' he says, 'you take care, just in case, you know. Because the talk,' he says, 'about your foul wickedness, it's got out all the way to St. Petersburg!' Well, of course, she poured him some wine, and all that, only she says to him, 'Go your way home in peace. I can't change my nature!' Three years passed by, and a month, and all of a sudden she called her peasants together. 'Here,' she says, 'take all my land, and farewell. And forgive me. And I'm going. . . .' "

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* *Uryadnik*—an uyezd (district) policeman.—*Tr.*

"To a nunnery," Khokhol put in.

Kukushkin, looking closely into his face, nodded confirmation.

"That's right. To be the mother superior. So you've heard about her too?"

"No, I never heard anything of the sort."

"Then how do you know?"

"I know you."

Shaking his head, the dreamer mumbled:

"You never do believe a person, ever."

And so it was invariably: the evil, cruel people of his stories would weary of doing evil, and "disappear"; or, more often, he would relegate them to some monastery—like rubbish to the dump.

Queer, unexpected ideas would come into his head. Frowning suddenly, he might declare:

"We shouldn't have conquered the Tatars. The Tatars are better folk than us."

This, when no one had been speaking of the Tatars—the talk centring around the organization of a fruitgrowers' co-operative.

Or, when Romass was speaking of Siberia and the wealthy Siberian peasants, Kukushkin might suddenly mumble thoughtfully:

"If nobody fished for herrings two or three years, they could fill up the seas to overflowing, and make a new deluge. It's wonderful, how that fish breeds!"

He was regarded in the village as a shallow, worthless fellow. His stories, and his queer ideas, irritated the peasants. And yet, though they cursed and jeered, they always listened attentively, and with evident interest—as though hoping to find some truth among his fancies.

"Windbag," respectable people called him; and only spruce Pankov would say gravely:

"Stepan—he talks in riddles."

Kukushkin was a very able worker. He did coopering; laid brick stoves; knew the ways of bees; taught the women to breed poultry; carpentered skilfully. And anything he undertook was sure to turn out well, though he worked sluggishly, grudgingly. He was fond of cats, and kept a good half score of them—well-fed beasts and beastlets—in his bath-house. Bringing them crows and jackdaws, he accustomed them to a bird diet—and thus aggravated the villagers' dislike; for his cats devoured the neighbours' chicks and hens. The women hunted Stepan's beasts, and drubbed them mercilessly; and his bath-house often rang to neighbours' furious complaints. But this did not disturb him.

"Stupid heads! Cats are hunting beasts—better than dogs. When I get 'em trained to hunt birds, we can breed cats—hundreds of 'em, to sell. And that means money in your pockets—silly fools!"

He had once learned to read and write, but no longer remembered these arts, and did not wish to refresh his memory. Endowed with strong native intelligence, he was quicker than others to grasp the essential points of Khokhol's talks.

"So," he would say, screwing up his face like a child dosed with bitter medicine, "so Ivan Grozny was no enemy to the little folk."

Kukushkin, Izot, and Pankov would come in of an evening, and stay, not infrequently, well into the night, to hear Khokhol talk of the structure of the universe; of life in foreign countries; of the revolutionary upheavals of the peoples. Pankov liked the French Revolution.

"That was a real turning in life," he said approvingly.

Some two years before this, Pankov had demanded his share of the family property from his father—a wealthy peasant, with a huge goitre and fearfully protruding eyes—and had set up in life independently, marrying "for love" an orphan girl, a niece of Izot's. He kept his wife in strict subordination, but dressed her up like a city woman. Pankov's father had laid a curse on him for his refractoriness, and spat furiously every time he passed his son's new house. It was against the will of the rich folk of the village that Pankov had let his house to Romass, and added on a lean-to for the shop. They hated him for this; but he received their hatred with seeming indifference. Of them, he spoke with unvarying contempt; to them, rudely and derisively. He detested village life.

"If I knew a trade, I'd go live in the city."

He was well built, and always neatly dressed; carried himself soberly, and stood strongly on his dignity. He had a wary, suspicious turn of mind.

"What makes you go in for this sort of business? Your heart? Or your head?" he asked Romass.

"Which do you think?"

"I don't know. You tell me."

"And which do you think would be better?"

"I don't know. Which do you think?"

Khokhol was obstinate. In the end, he made the peasant speak out.

"Your head, of course—that's the better way. A man's head won't let him work without gain, and where there's something gained—that's really solid. But if you take your heart—it's a bad adviser. If I did as my heart bids me, the trouble I'd get into—ugh! I'd set fire to the priest's place, that's sure—teach him not to poke his nose where he's not wanted!"

The priest, a malicious old fellow with the pointed little face of a mole, had made himself obnoxious to Pankov by interfering in his quarrel with his father.

Towards me, at first, Pankov was unfriendly, almost hostile. He even allowed himself to shout at me. This soon stopped; but I still sensed a secret mistrust in his attitude towards me. And, I must say, I returned his dislike.

They are very memorable to me—those evenings in the neat little room, with its bare log walls: the windows shuttered close; a lamp lit on the table in the corner; and, behind the lamp, the big man, with his heavy beard and high, bluff forehead, saying:

"The chief thing in life is, for man to advance further and further beyond the beast. . . ."

And—the three peasants, listening attentively: their eyes clear, their faces bright with intelligence. Izot always sat perfectly still, as though listening to some far-off sound that none but himself could hear. Kukushkin would twist and squirm like one tormented by mosquitoes. Pankov, fingering his short, fair moustache, might remark quietly, following up a thought:

"So there was need, after all, for folk to break up into classes."

One thing I greatly admired in Pankov: he was never rude to his labourer, Kukushkin; and the dreamer's fantasies always found in him an attentive listener.

After the evening's talk, I would climb to my attic room and sit awhile at the open window, looking out over the sleeping village and the distant fields, where stillness reigned inviolate. The glittering stars, piercing the murk of night, seemed nearer to earth the farther they were from me. My heart would shrink in the solemn hush; and my thoughts would flow out into the infinity of space, where thousands of villages lay pressed, soundless as ours, to the earth's flat surface. Immobility and silence.

The dark emptiness, taking me into its warm embrace, would cling, like a thousand unseen leeches, to my soul, until, gradually, I began to feel a sleepy lassitude, and a vague uneasiness crept into my heart. I was so small, so insignificant, on this earth of ours. . . .

Village life appeared to me a joyless existence. Time and again, I had heard and read that life in the country was more wholesome, and more genial, than in the city. Yet—I saw the peasants engaged in unceasing and inhuman toil. Many were sickly, many—disabled as a result of heavy labour; and a cheerful face was very rare among them. Workmen and artisans in the city, though they worked no less, lived their lives more cheerfully. They did not complain of existence in the dreary, tedious way of these morose villagers. The peasants' life did not seem to me a simple one. It required a constant strained attention to the soil, and a great degree of crafty shrewdness in dealings with one's fellows. Nor was there anything genial about this brain-starved existence. All the village people, I could see, went through life gropingly, like sightless creatures. They were all afraid of something; each mistrusted the others; there was something of the wolf in them.

It was hard for me to understand why they so persistently disliked Khokhol, Pankov, and all "our people"—those who wanted to build life according to the dictates of reason.

I saw clearly the advantages of the city: the eager desire for happiness; the bold and inquiring mentality; the multiplicity of aims and problems. And always, on such nights, I would recall two city people:

F. KALUGIN AND Z. NEBEI

"Watch- and clockmakers, and also take in repairs of different appliances, surgical instruments, sewing machines, music boxes of any make, and others."

This sign hung over a narrow doorway, between the dusty windows of a tiny shop. Behind one window sat F. Kalugin: thickset, round-faced, almost constantly smiling. He had a lump on his bald yellow skull, and there was always a magnifying lens in his eye. Sometimes, tinkering about in the works of a watch with fine tweezers, he would begin to sing, his lips under their stiff grey fringe of moustache. At the other window sat Z. Nebei: a lean, swarthy little man, looking rather satanic with his crisp-curled hair and pointed beard, his huge hooked nose, and his dark eyes, big as plums. He, too, was always at work, taking apart or putting together all sorts of delicate contrivances. Now and again he would suddenly roar out, in a deep bass:

"Tra-ta-tam, tam, tam!"

Behind them, heaped on the floor in chaotic disorder, I would glimpse crates, machinery, spare wheels, music boxes, schoolroom globes. Metal objects of the most varied shapes stood about on shelves; and on the walls hung rows of clocks, with swinging pendulums. I could have stood there, watching these people work, for days on end; but my lanky figure blocked the light, and the watchmakers would grimace frightfully, and wave their arms at me to drive me away. Moving off, I would reflect enviously:

"What luck—to know how to go about any job you please!"

I respected these watchmakers, and believed unquestioningly that they knew the secrets of all machines and instruments, that they could repair anything on earth. Here were men!

But village life—I did not like it. The peasants were hard for me to understand. The women, in particular, were endlessly complaining of ill health: now a "sinking in the heart," now a "heaviness on the chest," and always, invariably, a "cramp in the belly." Such symptoms were discussed more eagerly and more loquaciously than any other topics, when the women got together of a Sunday or holiday—down on the Volga bank, or sitting on the benches by their homes. The peasants were all extremely irritable, cursing furiously over every trifle. Three families fought with sticks over a cracked earthenware jug worth twelve kopeks when new. Before they were done, they had broken an old woman's arm and cracked a youngster's skull. It was a rare week that passed without such quarrels.

The young men treated the girls with brazen lewdness, playing all sorts of coarse tricks on them. Catching a girl in the fields, they would turn her skirts up over her head and tie them there with bast. "Tying her like a flower," this was called. Naked from the waist down, the girls would scream and scold; but the sport, it seemed, was not wholly unpleasant to them. At any rate, they made less haste than they might have, to undo their bonds. In church, at vespers, the young men occupied themselves with pinching the girls' buttocks. That seemed to be the only thing they came for. On Sunday the priest would rebuke them from the pulpit:

"Beasts! Can you find no other place for your obscenity?"

"In the Ukraine," Romass told me, "the people are more—well, more poetic in their religion. Here, all I see behind belief in God are the coarsest instincts of fear and greed. As to any really heartfelt love of God, any ecstatic wonder at his might and beauty—you won't find them in these people. A good thing, possibly. They'll be more easily rid of their religion. And it's a most pernicious prejudice, this religion—I can tell you that!"

The young men were boastful, but cowardly. Three times, already, they had waylaid me at night and tried to beat me up, but always unsuccessfully. Only once did a club catch me across the leg. I said nothing to Romass, of course, about such encounters; but that blow made me limp, and he guessed what had happened.

"Had a treat? I told you to be careful!"

Though he advised me not to go about the village after nightfall, I would sometimes make my way, by back vegetable gardens, to the bank of the Volga, and sit under the willows there, looking out through the transparent veil of night towards the low meadow bank opposite. Slow and majestic, the Volga would roll before me; and the rays of the unseen sun, reflected from the dead surface of the moon, would richly gild its waters. I did not like the moon. There was something sinister about it. Like a dog, I was unhappy in its light, and felt the desire to set up a dismal howling. I was very pleased when I learned that the moon's light was not its own; that it was dead, and there was no life—could be no life—upon it. Before this discovery, I had imagined it as inhabited by copper people. They were shaped of triangles, these people, and strode about on long, compass legs, clanging annihilatingly, like the church bells through Lent. Everything on the moon was copper, and everything—vegetation, animals, everything—kept up a smothered, unintermittent jangling, hostile to the earth; everything was deep in plots of evil against the earth. It was good to learn that the moon was a mere nothing in the skies; but it would have been better still to have some great meteor strike the moon—strike it so hard that it would burst into flame and send forth over the earth a new light of its own.

Watching the slow waves rock the brocaded strip of moonlight, watching them come out of the dim distance and disappear into the black shadow of the bluff bank, I would begin to feel a new mental vigour, a new clarity of perception. Effortlessly, my mind would dwell on thoughts inexpressible in words, thoughts alien to all my daytime life. The sovereign flow of the watery mass was almost soundless. A steamer might glide up or down the broad, dark stream—a fantastic bird in fiery plumage; and a soft murmur, as of heavy wings, would float past in its wake. Or a light might shine over by the meadow bank, sending long crimson rays across the water. Only a fisherman's torch; yet one could imagine it some homeless star, come down from the skies, skimming along the river like a flower of fire.

Things read in books would grow into strange fantasies, and imagination would conjure up scene after scene of unexampled beauty. I would seem to be drifting in the mild night air, drifting after the river.

Perhaps Izot would find me here. By night he seemed still taller, still more pleasant.

"You out again?" he would ask; and, settling down beside me, sink into a long and thoughtful silence—looking out over the river, or up to the sky, and stroking his silky, red-gold beard.

Sometimes he would dream aloud:

"I'll get some learning, read all sorts of books, and then—I'll follow every river, and whatever I see I'll understand! I'll teach other people! Yes, I will. It's a fine thing, brother, when you can open up your heart! Even women—some of them—if you talk from the heart with them—they understand. There was one in my boat with me, the other day, and she wanted to know what comes of us after we die. 'I don't believe in hell,' she says, 'nor heaven either.' And how do you like that? Women, too, brother—they're. . . ."

A pause, in search of words; and then:

"Yes, living souls."

Izot was a creature of the night. He had a fine sense of beauty, and a very pleasant way of speaking of it—in the soft phrases of a dreamy child. He believed in God, believed without fear, though keeping to the church conception of him. God was a big, fine-looking old man, a wise and kindly master over the earth. He could not conquer evil only because —"He can't find the time for everything—so many of us human folk there's got to be. But he'll manage, yes, he will—just you wait and see! Only Christ, now—that's what I can't understand. I can't see where he comes in, at all. There's God, isn't there? Well, and that's enough for me. But no, they come out with another fellow. God's son, they say. And what if he is his son? God isn't dead yet, that I know of."

More often, however, Izot would sit by my side in silence, absorbed in some thought of his own. Only now and again he might say, with a sigh:

"Yes, that's the way of it. . . ."

"What?"

"Nothing. I was talking to myself."

And again he would sigh, staring out into the cloudy distance.

"It's a fine thing—life!"

With that I agreed.

"Yes, life is fine."

The velvet band of shadowed water rolled mightily before us. Above it arched the silver band of the Milky Way. Big stars hung—golden, glittering larks—in the black sky. Softly, the heart sang its unreasoning conceits about the secret things of life.

Far over the meadows, the reddening clouds would be pierced by eager rays; and soon the sun would spread its peacock train across the sky.

"Like a miracle—the sun!" Izot would mumble smiling blissfully.

The apple-trees were in blossom, and the village lay buried in clouds of pink. A bitterish fragrance penetrated everywhere, drowning the odours of pitch and manure. Hundreds of trees, arrayed in the festive pink of satin petals, stretched out in even rows between the houses and the fields. When a light breeze rose, on moonlit nights, and the blossom-clad branches swayed, rustling barely audibly, it would seem as though heavy, blue-gold waves were rolling down upon the village. The nightingales sang, untiring, passionate. All through the day starlings kept up a merry clamour, and unseen skylarks poured down over the earth their sweet, unending melodies.

Of a holiday evening, the girls and younger women would drift up and down the street, singing, their mouths agape like fledgling birds', their eyes soft with languid, tipsy smiles. Izot, too, smiled tipsily. He lost weight, and his eyes sank into deep, black pits. The lines of his face grew still more stern and handsome—still more saintly. He would sleep all day, coming out into the village—pensive, preoccupied—only as evening began to gather. Kukushkin teased him, coarsely but amicably; and, with a shamefaced grin, he would reply:

"Shut up, will you? What can a person do?"

Rapturously, he exclaimed:

"Ah, but life is sweet! And—just to think of it—all the loving kindness there can be! All the good words people can find, to warm each other's hearts! Some of them—you won't forget 'em till your dying day, and when you rise from the dead, they'll be the first thing you remember."

"Look out! The husbands will thrash you yet," Khokhol warned him, chuckling affectionately.

"Well, yes. There's reason," Izot agreed.

Almost every night, through the music of the nightingales, Migun's high, soul-stirring voice would come pouring forth from the orchards, or the fields, or the river bank. He sang with amazing beauty, and, for his songs, even the peasants forgave him many sins.

More and more of the villagers would gather by our shop of a Saturday evening—among them, invariably, old Suslov, Barinov, blacksmith Krotov, and Migun. They would sit about, talking thoughtfully; one might leave, another come; and so it would continue, almost to midnight. Sometimes a drunkard would start a row—more often than others, ex-soldier Kostin, a one-eyed individual with two fingers missing on his left hand. Here he comes towards the shop, strutting like a gamecock, his sleeves rolled up, his fists flying wildly. In a hoarse, cracked voice, he yells:

"Khokhol! Wicked nation, Turkish faith! We want to know: why don't you go to church? Why? Heretic! Trouble-maker! We want to know: what sort of man are you?"

People begin to scoff:

"Mishka! What made you shoot your fingers off? Were you scared of the Turks?"

At this, he dashes into battle; but the peasants seize him and, shouting and guffawing, tumble him over the edge of the gully. He goes rolling down the slope, squealing intolerably:

"Murder! Help!"

Then he climbs out, grey with dust from head to foot, and asks Khokhol for the price of a glass of vodka.

"Why?"

"For the entertainment," Kostin replies. The peasants roar with laughter.

One holiday morning, when the cook had started the fire in the kitchen stove and gone out into the yard, and I was working in the shop, a gusty sigh sounded through the house. The whole shop shook. Tins of candy came tumbling down from the shelves. There was a tinkling of broken glass, a rattle of things falling to the floor. I hurried to the living room. Black clouds of smoke were rolling in from the kitchen, and behind the smoke something was hissing, crackling. Khokhol caught me by the shoulder.

"Wait."

Out in the entry, the cook began to wail.

"Fool woman!"

Romass darted through the smoke and set up some sort of clatter in the kitchen. He cursed loudly, then shouted:

"Stop that crying! Get some water!"

Billets of wood lay smoking on the floor, with bricks and blazing kindling scattered among them. The black mouth of the stove was empty. I groped through the smoke to where the water stood, and emptied a pail on to the fire on the floor. Then I began throwing the wood back into the stove.

"Careful!" Khokhol told me. He was leading the cook through the mess. Pushing her out into the living room, he commanded:

"Go lock up the shop!"—And, to me: "Careful, Maximich! There may be more explosions."

Getting down on his heels, he carefully examined each of the round spruce billets lying on the floor. Then he went to the stove and began pulling out the wood I had just thrown in.

"What are you doing?"

"Here—look at this!"

The billet he held out to me was strangely torn. Looking more closely, I saw that it had been hollowed out with a drill, and that the inner walls were black with soot.

"You see? Some devil or other stuffed the thing with gunpowder. Fools! What harm can you do with a pound of powder?"

He put the billet away and began to wash up, adding:

"It was a good thing Aksinya was out of the room. She might have been hurt."

The acrid smoke had lifted. Now I saw that the dishes on the shelves were shattered, and the window-panes all gone. Several bricks had been blown away from around the opening of the stove.

Khokhol's composure just now was not to my liking. He acted as though this stupid trick did not anger him in the least.

Children were running about outside. Voices rang out:

"Fire! Fire! Khokhol's on fire!"

A woman wailed. Aksinya, in the living room, cried anxiously:

"Mikhailo Antonich! They're breaking into the shop!"

"Hush! I'm coming," he said, drying his wet beard.

Hairy faces, distorted with fear and anger, were staring in at the open windows of the living room—eyes screwed up against the biting smoke. Someone shouted, shrilly, excitedly:

"Drive 'em out of the village! No end to their rows!"

One redheaded little fellow kept trying to climb in at the window, crossing himself and mumbling something inaudible before each attempt. But he could not manage it. His right hand was busy with an ax, and his left, clutching desperately at the window-sill, lost its grip every time.

Romass, with the hollow billet in his hand, asked him:

"What do you think you're after?"

"To put the fire out."

"There isn't any fire."

The peasant gaped, and disappeared. Romass went out on to the shop porch. Holding up the billet, he told the crowd:

"One of you stuffed this thing with gunpowder, and put it in among our firewood. But there wasn't enough powder to do any damage."

Standing behind Khokhol, I looked out at the crowd. The peasant with the ax, looking very frightened, was saying to his neighbours:

"The way he swung that billet out at me. . . ."

And soldier Kostin, with some liquor in him already, kept shouting:

"Drive him out, the heretic! Take him to court!"

But the majority were silent, watching Romass intently and listening suspiciously as he continued:

"It takes a lot of gunpowder to blow up a house. A pood, maybe. Well, why don't you go home?"

Someone cried:

"Where's the starosta?"

"Get the uryadnik!"

The peasants dispersed slowly, reluctantly.

They seemed disappointed.

We went in, and Aksinya poured tea. Never before had I seen her so mild and friendly. Glancing sympathetically at Romass, she said:

"You never put in any complaints, so they just play you any trick they please."

"Doesn't it anger you at all?" I asked.

"I can't spare the time to be angry over every silly trifle."

I reflected: if people all went about their work so imperturbably!

But he was already inquiring what books to bring me from Kazan, as he planned to make a trip there in the next few days.

It sometimes seemed to me that, where this man's soul should have been, he had some sort of mechanism, wound up, like clockwork, to run evenly all through his life. I was attached to Khokhol, and respected him highly; but I should have liked to see him get angry, some day, and shout, and stamp his feet, be it at me, or at anyone else—no matter. However, it seemed that he could not, or would not, yield to anger. When annoyed by foolishness or villainy, he would only narrow his grey eyes into mocking slits and make some cold remark—always very simple and laconic, and always merciless.

Once he asked Suslov:

"What makes you play the hypocrite, eh? An old man like you!"

The old peasant's sallow cheeks and forehead slowly crimsoned. Even his snowy beard seemed to turn pink at its roots.

"It does you no good, after all. And you'll lose people's respect."

Suslov hung his head.

"That's so. It does no good."

Afterwards, he told Izot:

"There's a leader! If we could pick that kind for our officials!"

. . . Briefly and clearly, Romass explained to me how I was to conduct affairs while he was away. Already, it seemed to me, he had forgotten—as one forgets a fly bite—the morning's explosion, the attempt to intimidate him.

Pankov came in, examined the stove, and inquired glumly:

"Scared?"

"What of?"

"It's war!"

"Have some tea with us."

"My wife's expecting me."

"Where've you been?"

"Fishing. With Izot."

He left. Passing through the kitchen, he repeated thoughtfully:

"It's war."

Pankov was always sparing of words in talking with Khokhol—as though everything of any importance or intricacy had long since been talked out between them. When Romass outlined the story of the reign of Ivan Grozny, I remember, Izot said:

"A tiresome tsar."

"A butcher," Kukushkin added. But Pankov declared, with conviction:

"He didn't show much sense. What if he did kill off the big princes, when he bred a whole swarm of little gentry in their place? And brought some in from outside, too—foreigners. There's no sense in that. A small landowner's worse than a big one. A fly's no wolf; you can't kill it with a gun. But it worries you worse than a wolf does."

Kukushkin appeared, with a pail of wet clay. Fixing the bricks back into place around the stove opening, he said:

"What those damn fools think up! Can't get rid of their own lice, but if it comes to killing a man—they'll try their hardest! Don't stock up too much goods, Antonich. Better make the trip oftener, and not bring much at a time. Before you know it, they might set the place on fire. Trouble's sure to come, now you're getting that thing fixed up!"

"That thing"—a very unpleasant thing to the wealthy ones of the village—was the fruit-growers' co-operative. By this time, with the aid of Pankov, Suslov, and another two or three clear-minded peasants, Khokhol had almost completed its organization. Most of the householders were now more favourably inclined towards Romass, and the number of customers in the shop had noticeably increased. Even the "good-for-nothings"—Barinov, and Migun—did everything they could to help Khokhol.

I was greatly attracted by Migun. His beautiful, sad songs went to my heart. When Migun sang, he closed his eyes, and his tortured face stopped twitching. He lived his life on dark nights, when there was no moon, or when the sky was veiled by heavy banks of cloud. Sometimes he would whisper to me, in the evening:

"Come out to the Volga."

On the bank of the Volga, I find Migun preparing to fish for sterlet—putting in order his forbidden tackle. He is sitting astride the stern of his boat, dangling his dark, bandy legs in the dark water. Very quietly, he says:

"When gentlefolk treat me bad—well, damn 'em, I can stand it somehow. A gentleman—he's somebody. He knows things I'll never know. Only—peasants, just like me. When they start abusing me, how can I stand for that? What's the difference between us? They count their money in rubles, and I count mine in kopeks—that's all!"

Migun's face keeps twitching painfully, the scarred eyebrow quivering. His fingers are nimbly at work, arranging the hooks on his tackle and sharpening the points with a file. His rich voice flows softly on:

"They call me a thief. That's right. I steal. Well, but don't everyone live by robbery?

Don't everyone squeeze all he can out of everyone else? That's how life goes. God—he don't love us, and the devil has his way!"

The black river crawls beside us, and the black clouds crawl overhead. It is too dark for us to see the other bank. Cautiously, the waves rustle along the sand. They wash up around my feet, as though hoping to carry me off with them into the shoreless, drifting darkness.

"A man has to live, don't he?" Migun demands, and sighs.

Up on the bluff, a dog howls drearily. As in a dream, I ask myself:

"To live the way Migun does? But—what for?"

It is very quiet on the river, very black and eerie. And the warm darkness has no end.

"They'll kill Khokhol. And you, too, like as not," Migun mumbles. Suddenly, he begins to sing, very low:

A-and my mother told me lovingly,
Mother said to me:
Ekh-ma, Yasha, ekh-ma, dearest soul of mine,
Live a quiet life. . . .

His eyelids droop. His voice grows fuller, and more melancholy. His fingers, arranging the tackle, work more slowly.

But I never lived a quiet life,
Ekh, never, never....

I have a strange sensation: as though the earth were collapsing, undermined by the heavy motion of the dark, watery mass; as though I were slipping, falling off the earth into the darkness, where the sun lies drowned.

Breaking off his song as suddenly as he began it, Migun silently pulls his boat out from shore, climbs in, and disappears, almost without a sound, into the blackness. I stare after him, wondering:

"Why do such people live?"

Another friend of mine was Barinov: a shiftless fellow, boastful and lazy; a gossipmonger, and a restless vagabond. He had lived in Moscow, and spoke of that city with profound disgust:

"The devil's own town! Such a mess! Churches—there's fourteen thousand and six of 'em, and the people—swindlers, everyone!

And they've all got the itch, like mangy horses—honest and true, they have! Merchants, soldiers, townsfolk—they all go around scratching, all over town. One thing, though—they've got the tsar gun there, the hugest cannon. Peter the Great cast it himself, to shoot against the rebels. There was a woman there, a lady she was, raised a mutiny against him, out of love. He lived seven years with her, to a day, and then he left her, with three babies. She got her temper up, and raised a mutiny. Well, then, brother—he just let go once against that mutiny, out of his gun, and—that was the end of nine thousand three hundred and eight souls! He took fright himself, even. 'No,' he says to Filaret—the Metropolitan that was—'we've got to seal it up, this devil's toy, against temptation!' So they sealed it."

When I told him this was all nonsense, he was offended.

"Good Lord! You've got an awful disposition! I heard all about it from such a learned fellow, and here you say. . . ."

He had been to Kiev, "to visit the saints." Of this experience, he said:

"The town—it's something like our village here. Up on a bluff, like us, and there's a river, too, only I can't remember what they called it. A puddle, compared to the Volga! That's a mixed-up town, I can tell you. All the streets are crooked, and they all go uphill. The people—they're khokhols. Only not like Mikhailo Antonovich. They're a different breed: half Polish, and half Tatar. They don't talk—they gabble. A filthy sort, and never combed. They eat frogs—the frogs there weigh ten pounds apiece. They use bulls for carting, and for ploughing, even. Wonderful bulls they have out there—the smallest of 'em four times the size of ours. Eighty-three poods, they weigh. There's fifty-seven thousand monks, and two hundred and seventy-three bishops.... Now, aren't you funny! How can you argue about it? I saw it all myself, with my own eyes. And you—were you ever there? No? Well, then! Me, brother—I like to be exact. That's the main thing."

He liked figures, and learned from me to add and multiply. Division, however, he could not endure. Writing with a stick in the sand, he would multiply huge figures with eager enthusiasm, entirely unembarrassed by mistakes. And when he had traced out the result he would stare down at the long line of digits in childish wonder, exclaiming:

"A thing like that—you can't even say it!"

An ungainly, tattered, dishevelled fellow, Barinov; but his face was almost handsome, framed in a crisp, cheery beard and lit by blue eyes that glowed in a childlike smile. There was a certain resemblance in character between him and Kukushkin; and—most probably because of this resemblance—the two kept away from one another.

Barinov had twice been to the Caspian, fishing, and raved about it:

"The sea, brother—it's like nothing else on earth! A man's like a midge before it! You look at it, and—what are you? And life is sweet, down there. All sorts of people get together, by the sea. There was an archimandrite, even. Not a bad sort. Worked like the rest of us. And then there was a cook there, too. Used to be some prosecutor's mistress—now, what more could a person want? And yet she couldn't hold out against the sea. 'You're very nice, my prosecutor, only just the same, goodbye!' Because anyone that's ever seen the sea, even once—he's got to go again. There's such space—like in the sky! No crowding. I'll go back there, too, to stay. I don't like people all around me—that's my trouble. A hermit, I ought to be, in a hermitage somewhere. Only —I don't know any decent ones."

He hung about the village like a homeless dog. The peasants despised him, but listened to his stories with the same pleasure as to Migun's songs.

"A clever liar! Interesting."

Some of his inventions impressed even such practical and suspicious-minded of the peasants as Pankov, who said to Khokhol, one day:

"Barinov claims the books don't tell the whole truth about Grozny. They cover up a lot. Grozny—he wasn't always a man, Barinov says. He used to turn into an eagle. And that's why, ever since, they stamp an eagle on our money—in his honour."

I noted—for the hundredth time!—that people showed far greater interest in the extraordinary, the fantastic, in what was patently—and often clumsily—invented, than in serious explanations of life's real truth.

But Khokhol smiled, when I spoke to him of this, and said:

"That will pass. The main thing is, for people to learn to think. And then they'll think their own way to the truth. As to those originals—Barinov, and Kukushkin—you should learn to understand them. They're artists, you see. Inventors. Christ must have been some such original, too. And, you'll admit, some of Christ's inventions weren't so bad."

A thing that surprised me was, that all these people spoke so rarely, so unwillingly, of God. Only old Suslov would remark—frequently, and with firm conviction:

"It's all God's will."

And always, in these words, I sensed a note of hopelessness.

I was very happy among these people, and there was much that I learned from them in our evening talks. Every problem that Romass brought forward, it seemed to me, sent out its roots, like a mighty tree, into the very substance of life—there, at the heart of it, to intertwine with the roots of another, equally mighty tree; and every branch was rich with the vivid blossoms of thought, with the verdant leafage of impressive words. Drinking in the exhilarating nectar of books, I began to feel that I was making definite progress. I talked with increasing confidence, and more than once Khokhol praised me, chuckling:

"You're doing well, Maximich!"

How grateful I was to him for these few words!

Pankov sometimes brought his wife, a mild-faced little woman, dressed in city style, with blue eyes that were bright with intelligence. She would sit quietly in a corner of the room, her mouth pursed up in modest silence; but after a while her lips would part, and her eyes open wide, in timid amazement. And then, at some sharp-pointed remark, she might break into a laugh, and hide her face in her hands in sudden confusion. Winking to Romass, Pankov would say:

"She understands!"

There were cautious visitors who came to see Khokhol. He would take them up to my attic room, and stay there with them for hours on end.

Aksinya would take them food and drink up there; and there they would sleep. Only

Aksinya and I would know of their presence; and she was utterly devoted to Romass—all but worshipped him. Izot and Pankov would row these visitors out, by night, to some passing steamboat, or to the landing at Lobyshki. Standing on the bluff, I would watch the pale lentil shape of the boat skim across the black—or, perhaps, moon-silvered—river, its lantern swinging to catch the steamboat captain's eye. And, watching, I would feel myself a participant in a great, secret cause.

Maria Derenkova came down from the city; but I no longer felt that in her glance which had always embarrassed me. Her eyes now seemed simply the eyes of a girl happy in the knowledge that she is pretty, a girl pleased by the attentions of her big, bearded friend. He spoke to her in the same even tone, slightly tinged with irony, as to others; but he stroked his beard more often when she was there, and a warm glow lit his eyes. As to her—her piping voice was gay. She wore a dress of light blue, and a light-blue ribbon in her fair hair. Her childish hands were strangely restless, as though in search of something they might seize upon. She kept humming some tune to herself, and fanning her rosy, glowing face with a tiny handkerchief. There was something about her that aroused in me a new uneasiness—hostile and moody. I tried to see as little of her as I could.

In the middle of July, Izot disappeared. People said he must have drowned; and two days later this idea was confirmed, when his boat, with a crushed side and a hole in its bottom, was washed up on to the meadow bank some seven versts down the river. It was thought that Izot had fallen asleep, and that the current had thrown his boat against a group of barges anchored about five versts below the village.

Romass was away in Kazan when this happened. In the evening, Kukushkin came into the shop. He dropped glumly on to a pile of sacks, sat awhile in silence, staring at the floor, and finally asked:

"When's Khokhol coming back?"

"I don't know."

He put a hand to his face and began rubbing his bruised cheeks, cursing softly, but obscenely, with sudden strange grunts—like a man choking over a bone.

"What's the matter?"

He looked up at me, biting his lips. His eyes were red, and his chin was quivering. He could not say a word. I waited tensely, understanding that his news was bad. At length, after a quick glance at the door, he forced it out, stammering:

"I rowed down there. With Migun. We looked over Izot's boat. The hole in the bottom—it was hacked through with an ax. See? With an ax. Izot was murdered. That's sure."

Throwing back his head, he began muttering obscene curses, one after another, interrupted by dry, hot sobs. Then he fell silent, and crossed himself several times. It was painful beyond bearing to watch him. His whole body shook; he was choking with grief and anger. He wanted to cry, but he could not—he did not know how. Again he threw back his head—jumped to his feet, and left.

The next evening a group of little boys, bathing in the river, found Izot. There was a wrecked barge, a little above the village, lying half on the pebbly bank, half in the river; and in the water under the stern, caught by a remnant of the broken rudder, lay Izot's long body —face downward, the skull crushed and empty. The water had washed away the brain. Izot had been struck from behind with an ax, and the back of his head had been split open. The current swayed his body, shifting the legs towards the bank and swinging the arms, so that he seemed straining to clamber out of the water.

A group of peasants, twenty or more, gathered by the river, glum and thoughtful. These were the richer villagers. The poorer peasants were not yet back from their work in the fields. The starosta, shifty and cowardly, fussed about, swinging his staff. He kept sniffing, and wiping his nose on his pink shirt sleeve. Kuzmin, the thickset shopkeeper, stood with his feet wide apart, his belly bulging hugely, staring—by turns—at Kukushkin and at me. His brows were grimly knit; but his colourless eyes were teary, and his pockmarked face, I thought, looked weak and bewildered.

"Oh, it's a bad job," the starosta whimpered, bustling up and down the bank on his crooked legs. "Oh, it's a wicked job!"

His plump daughter-in-law sat on a stone by the river edge, staring blankly down into the water and crossing herself with trembling fingers. Her mouth was quivering, and the lower lip, thick and red, hung disgustingly loose, like a dog's, baring ugly yellow teeth. Children came tumbling down the slope. Girls hurried down—bright splotches of colour against the bluff. Then the men began to appear, striding hastily in, dust-covered, from the fields. A low, wary hum hung over the crowd.

"A nuisance, he was."

"Who—him?"

"Kukushkin, there—he's a nuisance, that's so."

"A man killed, all for nothing."

"Izot never harmed anybody."

"Never harmed anybody?" Kukushkin yelled, turning fiercely on the crowd. "Then what did you kill him for? Eh? What did you kill him for, you bastards? Eh?"

Suddenly a woman screamed in hysterical laughter; and her wild cries were like a whip, lashing the crowd. The peasants turned on one another, shouting, cursing, roaring. Kukushkin darted up to the shopkeeper, and struck his pitted cheek a resounding blow.

"There—beast!"

Clearing the way with his fists, he tore out of the struggling crowd, and shouted to me—almost cheerfully:

"Get away! There's going to be a fight!"

Someone had already struck him. His lip was split and bleeding. But his face glowed with satisfaction.

"Did you see me give it to Kuzmin?"

Barinov came running up to us, glancing uneasily back over his shoulder at the crowd, which was now bunched close together beside the barge. The starosta's thin voice rose over the din:

"Well, prove it then! What did I wink at? Prove it!"

"I've got to clear out of this place," Barinov mumbled, as we climbed up the slope. The evening air was sultry and oppressive, so close that I could hardly breathe. The sun was setting, crimson among dense, bluish clouds. It threw a red gleam on the bushes around us. Somewhere, thunder rumbled.

Izot's dead body swam before my eyes. He swayed with the movement of the water; and, floating in the current, the hair on his empty skull seemed to stand on end. I remembered his low voice, his pleasant talk.

"There's something of the child in everyone. And that's what you've got to work from—the child in a man's heart. You take Khokhol —you'd think he was made of iron. But he's got the soul of a baby!"

Kukushkin, striding along beside me, said gruffly:

"They'll make away with all of us, the same way. God in heaven, but—it's stupid!"

Khokhol got home two or three days after all this, late at night. He seemed tremendously pleased over something or other, and more than usually affectionate in his greeting. When I had let him in, he said, clapping me on the shoulder:

"You're not getting sleep enough, Maximich."

"Izot's been murdered."

"Wha-at?"

Heavy knots of muscle bulged out on his cheeks, and his beard quivered so that it seemed to be flowing, cascading down his chest. He forgot to pull off his cap. Stopping short in the middle of the room, he shook his head heavily. His eyes narrowed.

"So. By persons unknown? Well, yes, of course."

He went slowly to the window and sat down, stretching his legs out wearily.

"I kept warning him.... Have the authorities been around?"

"Yesterday. The stanovoi."

"Well, and what came of it?" he asked—and added, answering his own question, "Nothing, of course."

I told him that the stanovoi had stopped at Kuzmin's, as he always did, and had ordered Kukushkin put in the lockup for striking the shopkeeper.

"So. Well, and what can a person say to that?"

I went to the kitchen to heat the samovar.

Over his tea, Romass said:

"It's such a pity, the way these folk kill off the best and finest among them. It looks as if—the better a man is, the more they fear him. They've just no use for him—he's in their way. There was a convict I met, when they were dragging me out to Siberia. He was a thief, he told me. There'd been five of them, working together—a regular band. Well, and a day came when one of the five proposed, 'Let's drop it, fellows. What's the good, anyway? It don't make us rich!' And for that they strangled him, when he was drunk and asleep. This convict who told me the story praised the man he'd killed to the skies. 'I've done for three since then,' he said, 'and it don't bother me. But our comrade—I'm still sorry for him. A good comrade, he was. Clever, cheerful, clean-souled.' 'Why did you kill him, then?' I asked. 'Afraid he'd give you away?' And you know—he was actually offended. 'Our comrade?' he said. 'Why, he'd never have given us away, not for anything, not for any money! Only—well, somehow, it wasn't comfortable with him around, any more. Us all sinners, and him some sort of saint. It didn't feel right.' "

Khokhol got up and began pacing to and fro across the room, his pipe clenched between his teeth, his hands behind him—a big, white figure, in a Tatar shirt that reached to his heels. His bare feet padded dully on the floor. Quietly, thoughtfully, he talked on:

"I've come up against it time and again—this fear of 'saints,' this extermination of the finest people. It's one of two things, when people have to do with such a 'saint': either they'll make away with him, by one means or another, when they get tired of baiting him; or—less frequently—they'll hang on his every word and look, crawl on their bellies before him, like so many curs. But so far as learning from him, imitating his ways of life, is concerned—that's a different matter. They don't know how to go about it. Or—perhaps—they've no desire to?"

He took his glass—already cold—from the table, and continued:

"That's quite possible. After all, when you think of it: here, at the cost of tremendous effort, people have built themselves a life, of sorts. They've gotten used to it. And then some solitary soul revolts, says their life isn't right. Not right? Why, we've put the best we've got into this life, may the devil take you! And they strike out at the teacher, at the saint. There! Leave us alone! And still, the truth is with those who say, 'Your life isn't right.' The truth is on their side. And if life is advancing towards better things, it's by their effort."

Pointing to the shelves of books, he added:

"Their effort, especially. If I could write a book! But I'm no good at it. My thoughts are heavy, clumsy."

He sat down at the table, bowing his head on his hands.

"How we'll miss Izot. . . ."

And, after a long silence:

"Well, I suppose we ought to get to bed."

I went to my attic, and sat down at the window. Heat lightning was flashing over the fields, flooding half the sky; and the moon seemed to start back in dread each time the transparent, reddish light gleamed out. Dogs were barking and howling. Were it not for this dismal chorus, one might have imagined oneself on some desert island. Thunder rolled, far off. Stifling heat poured heavily in at the window.

Again I saw Izot, lying there on the river bank, under the osier bushes. His blue face was turned up to the sky; but the glassy eyes were fixed in a stern, inward gaze. The red-gold beard was matted, the mouth open in astonishment.

"Kindness, Maximich, friendliness—that's the main thing! That's why I love Easter so: it's the friendliest of all the holidays."

His blue trousers had dried in the hot evening sun. They clung to the blue legs, washed clean by the Volga. Flies hung, droning, over his face; and his body gave off a heavy, sickly odour.

Heavy footsteps on the stairs. Romass appeared, bending his head as he came through the low doorway. He sat down on my cot, and lifted a hand to clasp his beard.

"I wanted to tell you: I'm getting married."

"Life won't be easy, here, for a woman."

He looked at me intently, as though wondering what further comment I might make. But I could find nothing more to say. The heat lightning flooded the room with an eerie glow.

"I'm getting married to Masha Derenkova."

I could not restrain a smile. It had never before occurred to me that one might call this girl—Masha. Funny! Neither her father nor her brothers, so far as I knew, ever called her by that name Masha.

"What are you grinning at?"

"Nothing."

"Think I'm too old for her?"

"No, no!"

"She tells me you were in love with her."

"I believe I was."

"And now? Got over it?"

"Yes, I think it's over."

He said quietly, letting go his beard:

"At your age, a person often has such fancies. At my age, it's no fancy. It just grips you, heart and soul, till you can think of nothing else."

And, baring his fine teeth in a wry smile, he continued:

"Antony lost the battle of Actium to Octavianus because he abandoned his fleet and his duties as commander and turned his ship to follow Cleopatra, when she got frightened and sailed away. So you see what it can do to a man!"

He got up and, throwing back his shoulders, repeated—like one who acts against his will:

"Well, in any case—I'm getting married!"

"When?"

"In the autumn. When we're done with the apples."

He went out, bowing his head in the doorway—lower than necessary. Getting into bed, I reflected that, perhaps, it would be best for me to leave when autumn came. Why had he said all that about Antony? I did not like it.

It would soon be time to pick the early apples. The harvest was abundant, bowing the branches to the very ground. A pungent fragrance hung over the orchards, where children were frolicking—gathering the pink and yellow windfalls and the worm-eaten fruits.

Early in August Romass returned from a trip to Kazan, bringing a boatload of wares and a second boat loaded with empty baskets. It was about eight o'clock, of a weekday morning. Khokhol had just washed and changed, and, sitting down to his tea, was cheerfully saying:

"It's pleasant, out on the river at night—"

When, suddenly sniffing, he broke off to ask uneasily:

"Don't you smell smoke?"

And at the same time Aksinya screamed, in the yard:

"Fire!"

We rushed out. The shed was on fire, on the side facing the vegetable garden. In this shed were all our stores of kerosene, tar, and oil. For an instant we stood there, half dazed, watching the businesslike way in which the yellow tongues of flame—pale in the bright sun—licked up the wall towards the roof. Then Aksinya brought a pail of water. Khokhol dashed the water against the blossoms of fire, dropped the pail, and said:

"It's no damned good. Get the barrels out, Maximich! Aksinya, run to the shop!"

I soon had one of the tar barrels out of the shed and through the yard, into the street. Next, I seized a barrel of kerosene; but when I started rolling it I found that the plug was gone, and the kerosene running out on to the floor. While I looked for the plug, the fire was not idle. Its searching fingers pushed in through the chinks in the board wall. The roof began to crackle, and a derisive humming sounded in my ears. Getting out of doors with the half-empty barrel, I saw figures—women, children—running towards us from every part of the village, screaming and shouting.

Khokhol and Aksinya were bringing the wares out of the shop and piling them up in the gully. In the middle of the street stood an old woman, all in black, shaking her fist and crying shrilly:

"A-a-ah, you devils!"

When I got back to the shed again, it was full of dense smoke, at the heart of which something was crackling and roaring. Scarlet ribbons dangled, writhing, from the roof; and nothing remained of the wall but an incandescent grating. Choking and blinded with the smoke, I managed somehow to roll a barrel to the door. But in the doorway the barrel stuck and would not budge. Sparks came showering down on me from the roof, stinging my face and arms. I called for help. Khokhol ran up and pulled me out into the yard.

"Run! Before it explodes!"

He darted into the house. I followed him in, and hurried up to the attic, to save my books. When I had thrown the books out at the window, I noticed a case of hats, and tried to send it out the same way. But the window was too narrow. I seized a half-pood weight and began breaking away the window-frame.

And then—there was a dull boom, and something splashed loudly on the roof. The barrel of kerosene had exploded. The roof caught fire, with an ominous crackling. A red stream of flame poured past my window, peering into the room. The heat became intolerable. I ran to the stairs; but thick clouds of smoke came driving up to meet me, and crimson serpents were wriggling from step to step. There was a crackling, down in the entry, as of iron teeth biting into wood. I lost my head. Smoke-blinded, gasping for breath, I stood motionless for I cannot say how many age-long seconds. A lemon-yellow, scarlet-bearded mug peered in at the window over the stairs, twisted in a crazy grimace, and disappeared. The next instant, blood-red spurts of flame broke in through the roof.

It seemed to me, I recall, that the hair on my head was sizzling: and I heard no sound but that. My mind cried that this was the end. My feet were like lead, and my eyes smarted painfully, though I tried to protect them with my hands.

But the all-wise instinct of self-preservation taught me the only possible way of escape. I seized an armful of whatever soft things came to hand—my mattress and pillow, and a big bunch of bast; huddled Romass' sheepskin coat over my head and shoulders, and jumped out of the window.

I was lying at the edge of the gully when I opened my eyes; and Romass, squatting beside me, was shouting:

"Are you all right?"

I got up, and stood staring dazedly at our dwindling house. It was all hung with bright-red streamers, and scarlet dog tongues licked the black earth before it. The windows belched black smoke. Yellow flowers swayed on the roof.

"Well? Are you all right?" Khokhol shouted again. His soot-smeared face, streaming with perspiration, seemed to be weeping grimy tears. His eyes blinked anxiously. Bits of bast were tangled in his beard. A refreshing tide of joy swept over me—an overwhelming rush of emotion. And then I felt a searing pain in my left leg. I dropped to the ground, and told Khokhol:

"My leg's out of joint."

He felt my thigh, then suddenly jerked it hard. A sharp pain shot through me—and a few minutes later, limping slightly, but drunk with happiness, I was helping to carry what had been saved down to our bath-house. Romass, very cheerful, his pipe clenched between his teeth, said:

"I was sure I'd lost you, when the kerosene exploded and went flying on to the roof. The fire shot up in a column, tremendously high, and then a huge mushroom formed at the top, and the whole house took fire at once. Well, I thought—good-bye, Maximich!"

He was tranquil again as always, methodically piling up the salvaged goods. Soon he told Aksinya, who was grimy and dishevelled as himself:

"You stay and watch this stuff. I'm going to fight the fire."

Bits of paper were fluttering in the smoke over the gully.

"Ekh," Romass said, "the books! What a shame! They were dear books to me."

Four houses were already blazing. The day was calm, and the fire took its time: spreading unhurriedly to right and left; sending out lithe tendrils that caught, almost reluctantly, at roofs and wattle fences. The dry thatch was combed by glowing hatchels; and twisted, fiery fingers wandered up and down the fences, plucking the platted twigs like gusli strings. Through the smoke-laden air sounded the drone of the flames—fierce, whiningly malignant—and the low, almost tender crackle of burning wood. Gold embers dropped from the smoke clouds into the street and yards. People ran wildly about, concerned each for his own house and goods; and the wailing cry sounded continually:

"Wa-ater!"

Water was far away—down the bluff, in the Volga. Romass, pulling one by the sleeve, another by the collar, swiftly herded the villagers together, divided them into two groups, and sent one to either end of the conflagration—to pull down fences and outbuildings. They followed his orders meekly enough; and a more rational struggle began against the fire's confident effort to devour the whole row of houses, the entire street. But—they went about the fight as though it were not their own: cautiously, and, as it seemed, without hope of success.

I, in my exultant mood, felt stronger now than ever in my life before.

At the end of the street I noticed a little group: the rich folk of the village, with Kuzmin and the starosta prominent among them. They stood there, shouting, gesticulating, waving their sticks: idle spectators, moving not a finger to put down the fire. Men were coming in from the fields—on horseback, galloping so that their elbows flew up to their ears. Women kept screaming. Youngsters raced up and down.

The outbuildings in another yard caught fire. The cowshed wall—a wattled structure, of heavy withes—had to be pulled down as quickly as possible. It was already decked out in bright ribbons of flame. The peasants began hacking at the supporting stakes; but sparks and live coals came showering down on them, and they sprang away, rubbing the spots where their shirts had begun to smoulder.

"Don't be cowards!" Khokhol shouted.

That did no good. He snatched someone's hat, and pressed it down on my head.

"You take that end. I'll take this!"

I hacked through one stake, and a second. The wall began to sway. Then I scrambled up it, and got my arms over the top. Khokhol tugged at my legs—and the whole wall came toppling down, burying me almost completely. The peasants quickly dragged it out into the street.

"Burnt yourself?" Romass asked.

His solicitude lent me new strength and agility. I wanted to make a good showing before this man who meant so much to me. And I worked like mad, eager only for his approval.

Overhead, pages from our books were still fluttering, like pigeons, in the smoke.

On the right, the fire was checked; but on the left the blaze spread ever further. Ten houses had already caught. Leaving a few men at the right to stop any new tricks the red serpents might attempt, Romass led the rest of his forces to the danger spot. As we ran past the group of rich peasants, I heard one of them exclaim viciously:

"It's arson!"

And Kuzmin said:

"His bath-house—there's the place to look!"

These words stuck, rankling, in my memory.

Excitement, as everyone knows—and especially joyful excitement—lends increased strength. In my elation, I worked away, insensible to fatigue—until finally I broke down completely. I recall myself sitting on the ground, leaning back against something hot, while Romass dashed water on me out of a pail, and the peasants, standing around us, mumbled admiringly:

"The lad's strong!"

"He won't let you down!"

I pressed my head against Romass' legs, and wept most shamefully; and he smoothed back my wet hair, saying:

"Rest, now! You've had enough."

Kukushkin and Barinov, both black as stokers, led me off to the gully, offering words of comfort:

"It's all right, brother! All over now."

"That was a scare, you had!"

I was still lying there, trying to pull myself together, when I saw some half a score of the richer peasants coming down into the gully, towards our bath-house. The starosta was in the lead. Behind him came two sotskys,* leading Romass by the arms. Romass' cap was gone. A sleeve of his wet shirt had been torn out. He had his pipe clenched between his teeth, and his face was grim and frowning. Soldier Kostin, brandishing a stick, was yelling frantically:

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* *Sotsky*—an elected village policeman.—*Tr.*

"Throw him in the fire! Heretic!"

"Open up the bath-house," someone demanded.

"Smash the lock. The key's lost," Romass said loudly.

I jumped to my feet, picked up a stick from the ground, and went to Romass' side. His guards moved away. The starosta cried, his voice shrill with fright:

"Believers! You can't break locks—it's against the law!"

Kuzmin pointed at me, and yelled:

"There's another one! Who's he, I want to know!"

"Easy, Maximich," Romass told me. "They think I hid all the goods in the bath-house, and set the shop on fire myself."

"The two of you did it!"

"Smash the lock!"

"Believers. . . ."

"We'll answer, not you!"

"We'll answer!"

Romass whispered:

"Stand back to back with me, so they can't hit from behind."

They smashed the lock. Several of the peasants crowded into the bath-house, and almost immediately came out again. In the meantime, I had thrust my stick into Romass' hand, and picked up another for myself.

"There's nothing there."

"Nothing?"

"Sly, blast 'em!"

Somebody said, irresolutely:

"We were wrong. . . ."

But several voices yelled in reply, wild as with drink:

"What d'you mean—wrong?"

"Throw 'em in the fire!"

"Trouble-makers!"

"Inventing their co-operatives!"

"Thieves! And their whole crowd are thieves!"

"Quiet!" Romass shouted, above the clamour. "You've seen for yourselves: there's nothing in the bath-house. What more do you want? Everything's burnt. What we saved is piled up here. You can see it all. What on earth could I gain by burning my own goods?"

"The insurance money!"

And again half a score of voices began yelling furiously:

"What are we waiting for?"

"We've stood enough!"

My knees shook, and for an instant everything went dark. Through a reddish mist, I saw a crowd of savage faces, with hairy holes that were yelling mouths. I could barely restrain the wrathful impulse to strike out at them. Now they were hopping about, circling us, with new cries:

"A-ah! They've got sticks!"

"Sticks!"

"They'll pluck my beard for me," Khokhol said, and I knew by his tone that he was smiling. "You'll get your share of it too, Maximich. I'm sorry for that. But don't get flustered. Keep your head."

"Look! The youngster's got an ax!"

True enough, I had a carpenter's ax stuck in my belt. I had forgotten about it.

"They seem to be getting cold feet," Romass whispered. "Only—if they do start anything, you'd better not use that ax."

A peasant I did not know—a lame, insignificant-looking little fellow, dancing about absurdly—squealed at the top of his voice:

"Keep out of reach, and stone 'em! Teach 'em what's what!"

He picked up a jagged piece of brick and hurled it violently, catching me a sharp blow in the belly. But before I could return the blow, Kukushkin swooped suddenly down on him from the top of the gully. Struggling, the two went rolling to the bottom. Then Pankov appeared, hurrying down to us, with Barinov and the blacksmith, and ten or twelve other peasants. And at once Kuzmin beat a dignified retreat:

"You've a wise head, Mikhailo Antonovich. You understand. A fire—it drives the peasants crazy."

"Come down to the river, Maximich. We'll get some tea at the tavern," Romass said, taking his pipe from his mouth and thrusting it into a pocket. He started heavily up the side of the gully, using his stick as a staff; and when Kuzmin, following, tried to make some remark, he said, without so much as a glance over his shoulder:

"Ass! Get away."

Where our house had stood, we found a golden mass of flickering embers; and among the embers—the kitchen stove, unharmed, a faint blue smoke rising from its chimney into the heated air. The red-hot bars of an iron cot jutted out in every direction, like a spider's legs. And the charred gateposts watched over the scene like swarthy sentinels—one of them in a red cap of embers, decked with fluttering, feathery flames.

"The books are all gone," Khokhol said, sighing. "Such a pity!"

Youngsters with sticks were driving smouldering remnants, like so many piglets, out of the yards into the muddy street, where they hissed and expired, sending up an acrid, whitish smoke. A blue-eyed, tow-headed representative of humanity, aged about five, seated in a warm black puddle, banged at a dented pail with a bit of wood, absorbedly drinking in the music of beaten metal. The fire victims wandered glumly about, collecting what remained of their household goods.

Weeping women cursed and quarrelled over charred rubbish. In the orchards, the trees stood motionless. Here and there the foliage had shrivelled with the heat of the conflagration; and the abundance of red-cheeked fruits was more clearly evident.

We went down to the river and bathed, then sat silently drinking tea in the tavern on the bank.

"Anyhow, so far as the apples go, the big-bellies have lost their fight," Romass said finally.

Pankov came in. He seemed thoughful, and milder than usual.

"Well, how are you feeling?" Khokhol asked him.

Pankov shrugged.

"The house was insured."

There was a silence. We sat like strangers, measuring one another with our eyes.

"What are you going to do now, Mikhailo Antonich?"

"I haven't decided yet."

"You'll have to leave here."

"I'll see."

"There's a plan I have," Pankov said.

"Come outside somewhere, and let's talk it over."

They left. In the doorway, Pankov paused and looked back at me, to say:

"You, youngster—you're no coward! You could stay on here. People would be afraid of you."

I also left the tavern, and lay down on the bank, in the shade of some bushes, looking out over the water.

It was hot, though the sun was already sinking westwards. My whole life in this village spread in review before me, as though painted in oils on the broad scroll of the river. My heart was heavy. But fatigue soon claimed its due; and I fell sound asleep.

"Wake up!" Dimly, through my sleep, I heard the call, and felt that someone was shaking me, trying to drag me away somewhere. "Are you dead, or what? Wake up!"

The moon hung over the meadows, across the river. It was blood-red, and big as a cart wheel. Barinov, kneeling beside me, was jogging my shoulder.

"Come along! Khokhol's been searching for you. He's worried."

And, following me up the slope, he grumbled:

"That's no way for you—sleeping where you drop! Suppose someone goes by, up on the bluff, and stumbles, and a stone comes down on you? Or—they might send it down on purpose, too. They don't stop halfway, here. Our people, brother—they remember grudges. They've nothing better to remember."

Someone was moving softly among the bushes. I saw the branches quiver.

"Find him?"—came Migun's rich tenor.

"Safe and sound," Barinov called back.

We walked a little way in silence. Then Barinov sighed, and said:

"Going out poaching again, for fish. Migun, too—life's not easy on him."

Romass reproached me sternly, when I came in.

"How can you be so careless? Are you looking for a thrashing?"

Later, when Barinov had gone, he told me glumly, quietly:

"Pankov offers you a place with him. He's planning to open a shop. I don't advise you to accept. Now, as to me—I've sold him all that was left, and I'm leaving for Vyatka. I'll send for you, as soon as I'm settled, and you can join me there. Agreed?"

"I'll think it over."

"Good."

He stretched out on the floor, changed his position once or twice, and lay still. I sat at the window, looking out at the Volga. The moon's reflection in the water was like the glare of the conflagration. A steam tug passed along the far bank, its paddles splashing heavily. Three masthead lanterns drifted through the night, brushing the stars, and, sometimes, hiding them.

"Fuming against the peasants?" Romass asked sleepily. "Don't. They're foolish, that's all. Malice is just one form of foolishness."

Such words could not comfort me—could not ease my bitterness, my poignant sense of injury. Again I saw the hairy, bestial mugs, spewing out their vicious squeal:

"Keep out of reach, and stone 'em!"

At that time I had not yet learned to erase from memory what was best forgotten. True, as I had come to see, each of these people, taken singly, had very little malice in him.

Many had none at all. Essentially, they were good-hearted beasts. Any one of them could easily be made to smile like a child; and any one of them would drink in, with childlike trust, tales of the quest for wisdom and happiness, tales of noble and generous deeds. Their queer hearts treasured anything that seemed to encourage the dream of an easy life, in which a man's own will would be his only law.

But when they got together, these people, in one drab mass—at village meetings, or in the tavern on the river bank—they would leave all their good qualities behind, and array themselves, like priests, in the vestments of falsehood and hypocrisy; they would develop a currish servility towards the strong ones of the village; and at such times one could not watch them without disgust. Or—again—they would suddenly be seized by fits of bitter malice. Bristling up and baring their teeth, like so many wolves, they would howl savagely at one another, ready to come to blows—and actually coming to blows—over any trifle. They were fearful, at such moments—capable of tearing to the ground the very church to which, only the evening before, they had gathered meekly and submissively as sheep to the fold. There were poets among these people, and gifted narrators. No love fell to their share. They were a village laughing-stock, neglected and despised.

I could not go on living among these people. I could not. And, on the day we parted, I set forth to Romass all my bitter reflections.

"A premature conclusion," he said, reproachfully.

"Well, but—what am I to do, if I'm convinced of it?"

"A wrong conclusion! Entirely unfounded."

He spoke to me lengthily, with kindly patience, trying to show me that I was wrong, that my conclusions were mistaken.

"Don't be impatient to condemn! Condemnation is the easiest way. Don't follow it blindly. Take things less to heart, and remember: everything passes; everything improves. Slowly? Yes, but—lastingly! Try to see everything with your own eyes; try to feel everything with your own hands. Fear nothing. But—don't be impatient to condemn. Good-bye, dear friend of mine—until we meet again!"

We met again in Seidlitz, fifteen years later. In the interim, Romass spent another ten years in exile in the Yakutsk region, for his activities in the "Narodnoye Pravo" party.

A leaden dreariness came over me when he left Krasnovidovo. I wandered about the village like a puppy that has lost its master. With Barinov, I tramped the countryside, hiring out to rich peasants: threshing, digging potatoes, clearing out orchards. I lived in Barinov's bath-house.

"Alexei Maximich, lonely soul!" Barinov said, one rainy night. "Look—shall we start out for the sea, tomorrow? Eh? What's to hold us? They don't like our kind, here. You never know what they might try, some day, when they get enough drink in 'em."

Barinov had made this proposal before. He, too, was in a dreary mood. His arms—long as an ape's—hung laxly at his sides, and he kept peering hopelessly about him, like a man lost in the woods.

The rain drummed against the window. A stream of water, rushing down the side of the gully, had begun to undermine a corner of the bath-house. The pale lightning of the summer's last storm flashed feebly across the sky. Barinov asked quietly, again, "Shall we start? Tomorrow?"

We started.

...It was inexpressibly pleasant—floating down the Volga in the autumn night. I sat at the stern of the barge, near the steersman—a shaggy monster with an enormous head. Stamping, heavy-footed, about the deck, as he swung the tiller, the monster rumbled thickly:

"O-o-oop! ... O-rro-oo!"

The water—shoreless, viscous as pitch—streamed silkily past, lapping gently against the side. Over the river hung black autumn clouds. Nothing existed but the slow-moving darkness. It had erased the banks. All the earth had melted into it, had dissolved into smoke and water—flowing endlessly, unbrokenly downwards to some hushed and empty space where there was neither sun, nor moon, nor stars.

In the damp darkness ahead an invisible steam tug puffed and splashed, as though straining to resist the tenacious force that drew it on. Three lights—two just above the water, the third high aloft—marked its progress. Four nearer lights floated, like golden carp, just below the clouds. One of these was the lantern at the masthead of our barge.

I felt myself confined within a cold and oily bubble. It slid slowly down an inclined plane; and I slid with it, caught—like a fly—inside. All motion, it seemed to me, was coming gradually to a standstill, and the moment was near when it would cease entirely. Then the tug would stop its grumbling, would stop threshing its paddles through the sticky water. All sounds would drop away, like the leaves from a tree—would be obliterated, like chalked inscriptions. I would be held in the sovereign embrace of immobility and silence.

And the big man pacing up and down at the tiller, in his ragged sheepskin coat and his shaggy hat—he too would stop, and stand for ever motionless, under the spell. He would no longer growl:

"Orr-oop! O-o-oorr!"

I asked him:

"What's your name?"

"What's it to you?" he answered dully.

He was clumsy as a bear, this man. I had noticed his face, in the fading sunlight, as we were leaving Kazan the evening before. It had seemed a blind, eyeless mass, thickly overgrown with hair. Taking his place at the tiller, he had emptied a bottle of vodka into a wooden dipper, drunk it off like water, and followed it down with an apple. And when the barge was jerked into motion, this man had grasped the tiller, glanced out at the red disk of the sun, and, throwing back his head, sternly pronounced:

"God's blessing!"

Our barge was one of a train of four being towed by steam tug from the fair at Nizhni-Novgorod down to Astrakhan. The cargo—sheet iron, kegs of sugar, and some sort of heavy crates—was going on to Persia. Barinov tapped the crates with the toe of his boot, sniffed at them, reflected awhile, and said:

"Guns, for sure. From the Izhevsk works."

But the steersman demanded, thrusting a fist against his ribs:

"What's that to you?"

"I was just thinking. . . ."

"Want your mug bashed in?"

Unable to pay our way by passenger boat, we had been taken on to the barge "out of kindness"; and, though we "stood our watch" with the rest, everyone on the barge regarded us as beggars.

"And you talk about—the people!" Barinov said. "Life—it's simple. If you come out on top, you ride. If not, you're ridden."

The night was so thick that I could not see the other barges, except for the tips of their masts, where the lanterns hung, traced against smoky clouds. The clouds smelled of oil.

The steersman's glum silence began to irritate me. I had been sent to the tiller by the boatswain, to stand watch with this brute, and help him out when needed. When the lights ahead swung round a bend, he would call quietly, "Hi! Take hold!"

I would jump up and help him swing the tiller.

"Done!" he would grumble.

And I would sit down on the deck again. Every attempt at conversation failed, crushed by his unvarying question:

"What's it to you?"

With what thoughts was he so preoccupied? As we passed the point where the Kama's yellow waters join the steel ribbon of the Volga, he turned his face to the north, and muttered:

"Scum!"

"Who?"

No answer.

Far off somewhere, in the boundless spaces of the night, dogs barked and howled—a reminder that remnants of life still lingered, uncrushed, as yet, by the darkness. Inaccessibly distant, they seemed, and—unwanted.

"Good-for-nothing dogs, they keep around here," the steersman suddenly declared.

"Where do you mean—here?"

"Everywhere. Where I come from—that's where you see real dogs."

"And where's that?"

"Vologda."

And now the words came out, like potatoes when the sack is ripped. Drab, heavy words:

"Who's that with you? Your uncle? He's a fool, far as I can see. I've got an uncle, now—he's clever! Wicked. And rich. Owns a pier. In Simbirsk. And a tavern."

He mouthed the words slowly, with seeming effort. Then, silent again, he stared ahead, watching the lantern at the tug's masthead creep, like a golden spider, through the web of darkness. I could not see his eyes.

"Take hold!... Can you read? Do you know, maybe—who writes the laws?"

Without waiting for an answer, he continued, "People say different things. Some say, the tsar. Some say, the Metropolitan, or the Senate. If I knew for sure who writes 'em, I'd go see him. I'd say to him: You write the laws so I can't swing out at anyone—so I can't even lift my arm. The law—it's got to be iron. Like a lock and key. Lock up my heart for me, and be done! Then I can answer for myself. But this way—I can't answer! I can't answer."

He was mumbling to himself, now—lower and lower, more and more disconnectedly, pounding the tiller with his fist.

Something was shouted from the tug, by megaphone; and the dull human voice seemed out of place, as had the barking and howling of the dogs—now swallowed by the gluttonous night. Oily yellow reflections of the tug's three lights drifted and drowned in the black water beside it, powerless to break the murk. And overhead, viscous and heavy—like a stream of river mud—flowed the dark, puffy clouds. We were slipping, slipping ever deeper into hushed chasms of darkness.

The steersman grumbled sullenly:

"What are they bringing me to? My heart's caught tight...."

Indifference seized me. Indifference, and a chill, dreary depression. I wanted nothing but sleep.

Dawn crept up warily, struggling through the clouds: dawn without sunlight, drab and impotent, painting the water a leaden grey. It revealed the river banks: lines of yellowing bushes, and black-boughed pines with trunks of rusty iron; a row of village houses; the figure of a peasant, seeming carved of stone. A gull swept by, its long wings whistling.

The steersman and I were relieved. I got under the tarpaulin tent, and fell asleep. But very soon—or so it seemed to me—I was wakened by loud shouts and heavy footsteps. Looking out from my shelter, I saw three sailors pressing the steersman back against the cabin wall, shouting, in a confused chorus:

"Drop it, Petrukha!"

"God save us! It'll pass!"

"Don't you take on!"

He stood with crossed arms, his fingers digging into the flesh of his shoulders, one foot pressing some sort of bundle to the deck. He offered no resistance—only turned his eyes to each of the sailors in turn, and pleaded hoarsely:

"Let me go, away from sin!"

He was barefoot, bareheaded, in only shirt and trousers. A dark mass of uncombed hair hung over his stubborn, bulging forehead. Tiny, bloodshot eyes—like a mole's—looked out from under the tangled mass, troubled and beseeching.

"You'll drown!" the sailors said.

"Me? Never! Let me go, brothers. If I don't go, I'll kill him! Just as soon as we get to Simbirsk, I'll. . . ."

"Drop it!"

"Ah, brothers. . . ."

He dropped to his knees, spreading out his arms until they touched the cabin wall on either side of him. He was like a man crucified. Again, he pleaded:

"Let me go, away from sin!"

His voice, strangely deep, held a heart-rending appeal. His spread arms seemed long as oars, and his hands—turned palms forward—were trembling. His bearish face, too, trembled, in its frame of matted beard. The blind mole eyes protruded, tiny dark balls, from their pits. It seemed as though some unseen hand gripped him by the throat, trying to strangle him.

Silently, the men moved out of his path. He got clumsily to his feet, and picked up his bundle.

"Thanks!" he said.

He crossed the deck, and jumped over the side, with an easy agility I could not have expected in him. I, too, ran to the side, in time to see Petrukha shake his wet head, fix his bundle on it, like a cap, and strike out diagonally towards the sandy bank. The bushes on the bank bowed in the wind to meet him, shedding their yellow leaves into the water.

The men said:

"So he mastered himself, after all!"

I asked:

"Is he gone crazy?"

"Crazy? Not he! He's saving his soul."

Now Petrukha had reached shallow water. He stood there a moment, breast deep, and waved his bundle over his head.

The sailors cried:

"Good-by-ye!"

And someone asked:

"What will he do without his passport?"

A redheaded, bandylegged sailor explained to me, with evident relish:

"He's got an uncle in Simbirsk, that cheated him out of all he owned. Well, and so he made up his mind to kill his uncle. Only, you see—he saved himself, and ran away from sin. A brute of a man, but—soft-hearted. He's a good sort."

By this time, the "good sort" was striding along the narrow strip of sand, upstream. Soon he disappeared among the bushes.

The sailors turned out to be fine fellows. They were all native Volga folk, like me; and by evening I was entirely at home among them. The next day, however, I noticed surly, suspicious glances—and guessed at once that Barinov's tongue must have got away with him, and made this dreamer spin some tale to the bargemen.

"Have you been talking?"

He scratched his head, and confessed—embarrassedly, but with a smile in his womanish eyes:

"Well—a little."

"Didn't I ask you to hold your tongue?"

"Well, and so I did. Only—it makes such a fine story! We were wanting a game of cards, and the pack was gone. The steersman had it. So we got dull. And I got to talking. . . ."

A few questions brought it out that Barinov—simply to pass the time—had strung together a most intriguing tale, at the end of which Khokhol and I, like the ancient vikings, were represented as battling, ax in hand, against a crowd of villagers.

There was no use being angry with him. Truth, to him, existed only outside the realm of reality. One day, during our wanderings in search of work, while we sat resting at the edge of some gully, he had said to me, affectionately and with strong conviction:

"Truth—you have to pick your own truth for yourself, to satisfy your heart! Look: there's a herd over there, across the gully, grazing; and a dog, and a herdsman. Well—and what of it? What can you or me get out of it, to warm our hearts? No, dear friend. You try to see things the way they are. Bad people—they're true. And good ones? Where are they? The good ones—they're still waiting to be invented! There!"

When we reached Simbirsk, the sailors told us, very ill-naturedly, to leave the barge.

"We don't want your kind," they declared.

They rowed us to the piers, and we sat awhile on the bank, drying our clothes. We had thirty-seven kopeks between us.

Then we went to a tavern and had some tea.

"What shall we do now?"

Barinov returned, unhesitatingly:

"Do? Why, keep on going."

We got as far as Samara as stowaways on a passenger boat. In Samara we hired on to a barge, which in seven days brought us, almost without incident, to the shores of the Caspian. Here we found work with a small fishers' artel, at the dirty Kalmyk fishery of Kabankul-Bai.

1923

М. ГОРЬКИЙ

МОИ УНИВЕРСИТЕТЫ